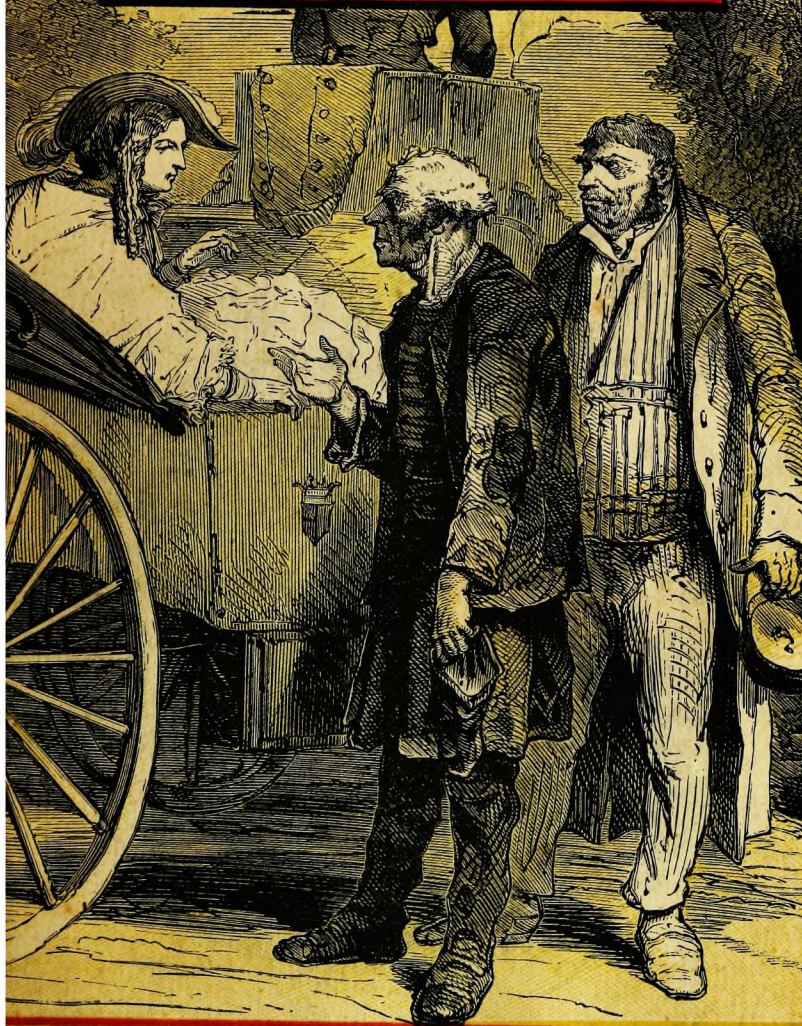


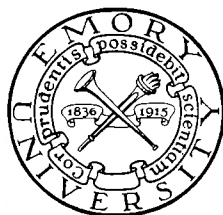
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LADY LORME



BY ANNIE THOMAS.

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LADY LORME

A Tale

BY

ANNIE THOMAS

(MRS. PENDER CUDLIP)

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THE WAKING," ETC.

PARLOUR LIBRARY EDITION

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LADY LORME.

CHAPTER I.

LOVE'S YOUNG DREAM.

TWENTY miles from Rugby—I will not say in what direction—the road suddenly breaks out of the deep shade of the pine-tree wood, through which it has for some distance been modestly contented to run in obscurity, and turns boldly away to the left.

It widens, too, considerably; and is altogether, from its superior state of macadamization, a more imposing road than it has been during its passage through the black pines. But though the improvement in its appearance strikes one the moment one leaves the shade of the trees in the rear, its good qualities do not come to a climax till it nears the massive iron gates and the turret-shaped lodge which mark the entrance into a gentleman's grounds.

The gates are old, strong, and surmounted with a row of grinning mastiffs' heads; the turret-shaped lodge has a hue of brown commingled with its red, that tells of no modern erection. The trees—nearly stripped of their leaves on that late October afternoon, on which we see the place first—bear witness, with all the mighty eloquence of their grand old lofty tops and knotted massive trunks, to the antiquity of Comb-

hurst, the name of the fine family mansion and estate of Sir Robert Lorme, Baronet.

The avenue is long, long enough, that is, to speak well for the size of the estate which could afford to give so much of itself up in avenue, and yet not long enough to make a pedestrian stranger rave at the distance from the turret-shaped lodge to the dark, grey, turret-guarded house itself.

Combhurst might have claimed to be called a castle without a particle of ridicule attaching to the claim ; but it expressed in its *title* no such dignity, though it did fully and well in its appearance. A real old castle it looked ; and had armed men sprang into view on its battlements, a flag waved from its topmost turret, and men in armour clanked across its paved courtyard, I doubt if a nineteenth-century observer would have felt a momentary throb of surprise.

But Combhurst, far from affording such a mediæval spectacle, sent out from its wide portals on this autumnal day a far fairer one. A lady and gentleman, attired in the orthodox costume of the period, came out, accompanied by a bounding, yelping troop of dogs, and skirting the paved courtyard, they gained the avenue, up and down which they walked for upwards of an hour ; and meanwhile the day was dying.

The lady was about nineteen or twenty, and though the hat shaded her face, and the long cloth paletôt her figure, it could be seen at a glance that both were rarely moulded. A proud, determined step—a proud, frank, fair, generous face—bright, rippling, chestnut hair, with a tinge of gold where the ripples came, and almost black shades in other places—rather above the middle height, even putting that at the extreme, slenderly and gracefully formed, and gifted with a voice

like a full-toned bell, rich and clear ; all this could be seen and heard as Miss Lorme raised her dark, trailing linsey from the damp, leafy ground, with one hand, and placing the other on her companion's arm, earnestly interrogated him as to his opinion about something.

He was a man seven or eight years her senior, this companion of hers, whose opinion she sought to learn so earnestly. A fine, dark, handsome man, with a polished, graceful bearing, that was never effeminate and never put on apparently, and that yet could on occasion be exchanged in a moment for a fierce, impetuous ferocity, that it was ill work to raise. Lord Evesham had led a wild, irregular life abroad for many years, men said ; but now he was come home to be good, and to marry Audrey Lorme, who loved him with an affection that forbade her attaching any credit to the tales some of her friends had told to his disadvantage.

"No, don't go yet, Fred," she pleaded, as she saw him surreptitiously looking at his watch. "Evesham is only nine miles distant ; and what is nine miles to Cock Robin ? Even if you will not do as I wish you, stay and dine with us, and see this bride my brother is bringing home in such an extraordinary manner."

"Cock Robin isn't used to your Warwickshire roads, you see, Audrey ; and to tell the truth, Cock Robin's master has done pleasanter things during his past career than ride at night through a confounded wood that appears to have been originally designed for the express convenience of those who covet their neighbour's goods, and are not particular as to the means they take to get them. Every other step is on to a boulder, too, it seems to me, and the intermediate one is a rock ; and those are things that don't agree with Cock Robin. So I think I shall be off

while the daylight lasts, and leave the paying my respects to Lady Lorme for a few days."

"What a long speech, Fred ; and what an unsatisfactory one ! It means that you won't stay."

"Exactly ; better without me to-night, my darling, believe me. Robert doesn't bring his bride home under such remarkably brilliant auspices that he need care to have other eyes than his own witness her first interview with his sister."

"Robert—Robert has been *mad*, I think," said Audrey Lorme, turning her face, now flushed into crimson, towards her lover. "Fancy a Lorme giving any one occasion to speak as you have just spoken !"

"Oh ! a maniac, decidedly !" said Lord Evesham, shrugging his shoulders ; "every fellow is who goes and marries from the ranks—who doesn't know who he's marrying, in fact—"

"Ah ! *that*, perhaps," interrupted Miss Lorme, hastily ; "but when you say marrying 'from the ranks,' you imply marrying some totally illiterate and uneducated person ; and that, until I have personal evidence to the contrary, I will never believe that Robert has done."

"Well, I tell you what it is, Audrey," said Lord Evesham, clasping very kindly the little hand that lay upon his arm, "you are too fond of your brother to make it necessary that I should say it, but still I will : remember it won't be for long, so, for your own sake, give as warm a greeting to, and make things as pleasant for Lady Lorme as may be."

"You mean well, and you are always kind, Fred," said the lady of his love, somewhat more haughtily than she had ever spoken to him before ; "but if you think that if I find Lady Lorme a little ignorant non-entity, I shall patronise her ; or a great, strong-

minded, arrogant woman, I shall kneel down and do homage to her, you are mistaken."

"I do not think you will find her either the one or the other, Audrey. Excuse me, I can't help laughing; the vision you have conjured up of a possible 'my lady' is so amusing."

"Why do you not think I shall find her like either the one or the other object my imagination has conceived, Fred?"

"Because—oh, half-a-dozen reasons occur to me, if I only liked to give them; but one or two will be sufficient for sensible Audrey. One is, that ladies invariably conceive something erroneous relative to the appearance of their unknown sisters; another, and better one is, that Robert must have had some rarely fair excuse for making such—an ass of himself!"

"Yes," said the girl, "*that*, after all the talking about it, is what the matter resolves itself into. That *my brother*, Sir Robert Lorme, has been weak and foolish, it's hard to bear, Fred—harder than you think. Robert, who was so lofty-minded, so honourable, so *sensible*, so staid—Robert, whom I loved as a brother and respected as a father—Robert, to have let himself be tricked into a private marriage with a girl whose antecedents he either abstains from giving me, or does not know himself! I am hurt in my love for my brother as well as in my pride for our name, Fred; and it's useless even for *you* to argue against it."

"Look here! now, do be reasonable," said Lord Evesham, impatiently. "Do you think I should not take fire soon enough if I thought for one moment Robert had married a woman with anything more against her than being beneath him in rank? I should

insist quickly enough, if I thought he had done worse than a weak thing, on your giving me the right to remove you from the shadow of a shade even. But I don't doubt his moral circumspection in the least ; I only doubt his worldly wisdom. But I shall leave you now, Audrey, for I am detaining you from dressing, to receive the bride, for no good end. We'll go in, if you please, and ring for my horse. I shall call in a day or two to pay my devoirs to my lady."

"Why not to-morrow, Fred?"

"To-morrow I shall go up to town. By-the-bye, can I bring you anything? Wouldn't you like to have some trifle to offer as a bridal-gift?"

Miss Lorme laughed.

"You are determined that I shall not fail outwardly in all that is due to Sir Robert Lorme's bride from Sir Robert Lorme's sister. Well, Fred, I love you the more for defending his dignity, though I may have seemed to take it ungraciously. Yes, bring me a brooch or a pair of earrings. I leave the choice to you."

"Why not a bracelet?" he asked, carelessly, as he took his note-book out and prepared to jot down the commission.

"Well, a bracelet ; perhaps it would be better ; yes, let it be a bracelet," said Audrey, with a woman's ready acquiescence in whatever is proposed by the man she loves. "Here's Cock Robin ; I must go and speak to him," she added, as the groom led Lord Evesham's horse round.

And then Cock Robin's head was caressed and his praises were sounded for a few minutes, and then Lord Evesham mounted and rode away, leaving

Audrey watching him till a turn in the avenue hid him from sight.

"Dear Fred!" she murmured to herself, as she re-entered the house; "how fond he is of Robert, to be sure!" and then she sat herself down on a sofa in the drawing-room, and thought very kindly of the brother who was that evening going to bring home an unknown and unwelcome bride.

Presently the daylight died out completely, and she sprang to her feet and rang for her maid and a candle, saying, "Fred is right; I must go and dress; for the best reception that can be given her is due from me to Lady Lorme."

Ordinarily Miss Lorme's *toilette* was a matter of not the slightest difficulty to her. She was one of those specially gifted people who look well in anything, or almost anything; added to this, though fastidious, she was not fussy; so, as I have just stated, ordinarily her toilette was not a matter of the slightest difficulty to her.

But to-day Lucy, her maid, found her not capricious, but undecided—uncomfortably undecided. She did not wish to be either too richly or too simply attired. Had her brother been about to bring home the bride Sir Robert Lorme ought to have brought, Miss Lorme would have experienced no misgivings on the subject of the dress befitting the occasion. As it was, she had many. Supposing Lady Lorme should prove to be a humble-minded, commonplace individual, who should show herself to have been unequal to the task of having provided herself with a trousseau worthy of her sudden exaltation, in that case splendour and elegance on the part of Miss Lorme would make not only my lady but my lord uncomfortable. On the

other hand, too simple a dress would make too low an appreciation of the affair altogether for Audrey to tolerate the idea of it long.

"I tell you what it is, Lucy," she said at last, "I'll wear that low green silk with a black lace Zouave jacket; it's not at all remarkable in any way, and it's a favourite of Sir Robert's;" and when she was arrayed in it, had any possible readers of these pages been there to see, they would have owned that after all Miss Lorme had made a wise selection.

Even dressing in a state of indecision was better than sitting alone in the drawing-room, as she found herself doing soon, waiting for the advent of the travellers. It was all lighted up brilliantly, and the fire leapt up in cheerful spasmodic blazes, and flowers bloomed freshly in hanging baskets and in vases on the side-tables, but Miss Lorme had never found the room dull or unpleasant to sit in alone as she did on this evening.

"They were to be here by this time," she said, aloud, in her impatience, as the clock on the mantel-piece marked the half-hour after six: "dining at seven, Lady Lorme will hardly have time to take off her bonnet. Robert should have named a later hour to spare his bride embarrassment."

And as she said it, a carriage drove up to the door.

Miss Lorme rose to her feet, and as she did so her eyes fell on her own form reflected at full length in a glass before her. Little vain as she was, she could not avoid seeing that she was beautiful, in a grand proud style that might strike discouragement into the heart of the new-comer, if she was indeed, as Lord Evesham had suggested, "raised from the ranks;" and in the same moment that she saw this, she took

the resolution of going out into the hall to meet and greet them less stiffly, more warmly and cordially, than be waiting in the drawing-room.

She went out quickly, and there was a confusion of tongues and a rush of cold air in the hall, and then she was clasped round the waist, and kissed by her brother.

"Robert, my dear Robert, I'm delighted to see you back ; and this is——"

She stopped in utter surprise as a lady came daintily forward, with little languishing steps, whose hand Sir Robert took in an almost devotional manner, saying, as he did so—

"This is my dear Leonie, Audrey ; this is your new sister ; you must love each other for my sake at first—you will soon have to do it on even better grounds."

And as Miss Lorme bent down to kiss the stranger's white rounded cheek, the stranger said, in a charming, sweet, exquisitely modulated voice, that had a touch of some kind of accent about it that rendered it doubly *piquant*, "I have no doubt we shall get on excellently ; will some one show me to my room ?"

Audrey need not have feared overpowering Lady Lorme by the richness of her attire, or the dignity of her presence, that was very evident. On the contrary, Audrey acknowledged to herself that she was considerably overpowered by the apparition before her.

All that Sir Robert "had condescended,"—as his sister had phrased it in her anger—to tell her about the lady he had married with such velocity was, that she was a music mistress, and that he had fallen in love with her from seeing her come to the house of the friend with whom he was staying in town for a fortnight, to teach crotchets and quavers to one of the

friend's daughters. He had sought her impulsively, made her an offer, found her rather superior to his preconceived ideas of an angel, and married her by license privately at an old church in the city. From such folly, as Lord Evesham had said, Audrey might have guessed he had a "rarely fair" excuse, and so he had.

The lady, who had come forward with dainty, gliding steps, was shorter by a head than Audrey Lorme. Her face was marvellously fair, with that peculiar tint of wild rose-leaf fairness that is generally found united with blue eyes and golden hair; but the eyes that gleamed brightly in Lady Lorme's most lovely face were cut out of dark-grey velvet—soft, lustrous, shining, dark-grey velvet; and the hair that was banded back smoothly, just leaving the tips of her white, jewel-laden ears visible, was black as a raven's wing.

Her face was oval; the delicate lines of it were as softly yet as clearly and decidedly defined as those of an egg. The shape of her nose, chin, and mouth was of the truest, purest order of beauty; the form of the rounded cheek could not have been improved had Phidias himself been set to the task. It was indeed a singularly lovely face, and startling as it was in its beauty, it was still more startling in expression. You looked at the brow, and saw sorrow, and you looked at the mouth in the same instant, and saw scorn, and you darted an interrogatory glance at the eyes, and, lo and behold! you were baffled entirely, for they gleamed forth nothing clearer to read than satirical observation. And all in a moment, as Audrey saw this in her sister-in-law's face, it changed to a tender sweetness, and then with a gliding step she followed her own maid up to her own room.

"Rather an extravagant travelling dress, even for the wife of a rich baronet," thought Audrey Lorme, as she walked into the drawing-room again, followed by her brother; and well she might think so, for my lady was robed in dark-blue velvet—dress and cloak alike; "and I needn't oppress myself with putting her diffidence at ease," she added to herself, as she gained the sofa from which she had started to welcome them; for I see plainly enough that Lady Lorme is quite equal to the position."

"Well, Robert," she said aloud, as he came and stood before her, "what have you to say for yourself? Surprises are over in life for me now Sir Robert Lorme has made a secret and romantic marriage."

She said it all laughingly, but many a true word is spoken in jest.

"Say for myself?" he replied, taking her hands in his, and looking down into her face affectionately, "you have seen her, therefore no excuses are needed. But tell me, Audrey, what do you think of my wife?"

CHAPTER II.

LADY LORME KEEPS DINNER WAITING.

THE question asked at the close of the last chapter is, perhaps, the most embarrassing that the tongue of man can frame. You may think a man's wife detestable, but when he, with a touching reliance on her charms, asks you what you think of her, you cannot tell him so—at least, if you do, he will hate you, and think your taste vilely bad into the bargain.

It is not all bridegrooms who are weak enough to catechise the rest of the world as to its opinion on the individual member selected by him to share his name and fortunes; if he does ask, and his male friends can with any semblance of truth, they get out of their strait neatly by clapping him on the shoulder heartily, and telling him that, "by Jove! he's a lucky fellow." But ladies cannot utter this speech in the order of things, and would not if they could; so their case is hard when asked in the first bloom of matrimonial enthusiasm by friend or relative what they "think of his wife."

Audrey experienced all these difficulties at which I have hinted in their full force. Lady Lorme and Lady Lorme's blue velvet costume had been before her eyes too short a time for her to come to a proper decision as to their respective merits; the short vision she had enjoyed had, to use a nautical phrase, flabbergasted her altogether. She felt that if she was candid she

should not be kind, and that if she was kind she could not be candid. She thought for a moment of Lady Lorme's graceful beauty, and Lady Lorme's aptitude for marrying advantageously out of hand ; she thought of the sorrow on her brow, and the satire in her eyes, and the sudden change in both the moment she saw they were seen. She knew her brother was impatiently awaiting the verdict he had asked for from her lips, and she rushed at her fence bravely.

"I think her the prettiest woman I ever saw in my life, Robert dear, and I've no doubt I shall think her all that you do in a very short time—there's the dinner-bell, it will hurry her dreadfully, I am afraid."

Miss Lorme had been mistress of Combhurst a long time, and as she thought of Lady Lorme being hurried by the clanging bell, the hostess rose superior to the sister. "I will send and hear, or go and hear, when she will be ready, shall I, Robert?"

"Perhaps I had better go," said Sir Robert, hastily ; he had had the benefit of a fortnight's travelling experience with my lady, and he knew some of her idiosyncrasies better than Audrey could be supposed to do. As he left the room the bell ceased ringing, to Audrey's momentary surprise.

A feeling of annoyance that still she could hardly define crept over Miss Lorme as her brother's footsteps died away. "Poor dear, noble-hearted fellow, she'll make a slave of him," she muttered to herself. "Fred was right ; she is utterly different to everything I had imagined ; I wish she would come down, there is something about her that makes me long to see more of her."

But Miss Lorme was not destined to see more of her new sister-in-law just directly, for at this juncture of

her thoughts a footman came in with subdued and seething wrath in his face and manner to announce that "My lady had sent down word for the bell to stop, and the dinner to be put off till eight."

"Upon my word," said Audrey, as soon as the man was out of the room and hearing, "she gives her orders, does Lady Lorme, with a freedom and graceful determination to assert her rights at once, that speaks well for her feminine adaptability for any niche she may be required to fill ; there will be no severe strain on my exertions, I perceive, to make her feel quite at home." And then Miss Lorme looked about for something to while away the time until Lady Lorme should be good enough to allow her to eat her dinner, and, as might be expected, did not succeed in finding anything that would do it. It is very disagreeable to have the reins taken out of your hands by a stranger before you have time to offer to give them up. Miss Lorme took to turning over her *carte de visite* album, and found that every one looked ugly ; that failing to amuse, she made Mephistopheles, her white Skye terrier, retrieve the sofa-cushion ; but for all that Meph was a lively and inspiring companion when well roused, that hour lagged in the drawing-room of Combhurst.

And how, meanwhile, was it speeding upstairs in my lady's dressing-room ? Lady Lorme had ordered a hot bath immediately on gaining her own room, and now, after having taken it, and being considerably refreshed thereby, she was sitting to have her hair dressed before a large cheval glass, talking at intervals to her husband, who was in the adjoining bedroom, through the open door.

Lady Lorme's maid, Dickson, had only been in her possession—I mean service—since her marriage ; the

time was short, and Dickson not thoroughly broken in to her work yet. In various odd numbers of the penny novels she had occasionally perused with devouring interest, Dickson had read of eyes flashing; she had believed that they might do so in the enchanted world in which George Reynolds and others of that ilk dwelt, but she had scarcely credited that orbs did anything of the kind in the realms in which she lived and moved and had her being. But now standing before the glass in which her mistress's face was clearly revealed, she had her doubts set at rest at once and for ever. Lady Lorme's maid let the brush slip in its passage over the silky tresses, and Lady Lorme's eyes flashed up like great black diamonds on the surface of the glass. "Do that again, and you go to-morrow morning," she said, in her pretty, piquant tones, that were so witching and beautiful; and then she turned round and caught the wrist of her astounded abigail with a grip you had deemed it impossible such a tiny, white, blue-veined hand could give.

"What were you saying, Robert?" she then asked aloud of her husband, who forthwith repeated a remark he had made when the brush was slipping or about to slip, viz., that "Audrey had probably put dinner off for half an hour, but hadn't she better make haste now?"

"I have sent down word about dinner, Robert; it never occurred to me to consult Miss Lorme about it. I hope you will forgive the omission."

"My dear Leonie, 'forgive;' what a word! You will find neither Audrey nor me tenacious about anything you do, or do not do."

"How beneficent of the future Lady Evesham," said the fair bride, laughing; "your sister is not so

handsome as you had led me to believe her, Robert ; when she came out into the hall she looked as if she had been sitting too near a roasting fire."

"Audrey always colours a good deal from excitement," said Sir Robert, sauntering in and leaning against the door, while he watched the final touches being put to the pale pink *moire antique* in which his wife was now arrayed.

"Ah, that was it, then, probably," said my lady, holding out her tiny, exquisitely-rounded white arm for a cameo-bracelet to be clasped upon it. "All the blood of the Lormes was in her face as she came out to view the intruder. I wonder what she expected to see? a milkmaid who would drop her a curtsy, and say, By your leave, miss, judging from her look of anything but gratified surprise when she saw *me*."

"Audrey was what every one must be, enchanted with you."

"She told you so?"

"Well, not in so many words, but I know her manner better than you do, and I saw it at once. I —may I offer you my arm, my dear Leonie?"

"To go down? No, not yet; I want to look at my rooms; besides, I hate going down to a drawing-room with nobody in it. I shall keep the drawing-room to amuse myself with after dinner; now you shall make a little tour of inspection with me, and hear my opinion of the arrangements that have been made for your wife. In the first place, the furniture of this room is old, scrubby, and unbecoming. *Green!* who ever heard of having green for a lady's dressing-room? can't I, *may* I not have some other colour, Robert?"

She, that velvet-eyed Venus in pink *moire*, had

her arms clasped caressingly over one of his, as she asked the question. He looked down at her with such deep, hearty love and admiration, that she loosed her hold, and asked suddenly for another bracelet; "she was like a dog with only one ear," she said, laughing. Was it that the young bride was too bashful to stand unmoved beneath the admiring gaze of her lord, even?

"My dear Leonie, as if you were not sure that your wishes shall be law with me. Consult nothing but your own taste, and then you may be sure that I shall be pleased."

My lady was standing now before the fire with one little daintily *bottined* foot poised upon the fender. As her husband finished speaking she called him to come nearer, and when he came close to her, and put one arm round a waist slender as the now famous one which the Empress of Austria has achieved, she asked—

"Tell me the name and title of the man your sister Audrey is going to marry again, please, Robert. I have a very bad memory for things that only concern other people, and I have forgotten it; but she will think us both indifferent, and all sorts of dreadful things, if I betray ignorance on the point."

"Frederick Austin Compton, Lord Evesham of Evesham, and half a dozen other places. He's one of the nicest fellows in the world; I wish he had been here to-night; I forgot to ask Audrey about him?"

"Yes, I wish he had," replied the lady; "I shall be glad when the terrible ordeal of being shown to the only two people likely to be prejudiced against me, and to prejudice *you* against me, is over. When are they to be married?"

"In December." (Sir Robert elected to ignore the other part of her sentence.)

"Oh, indeed ; so soon ? Well, now, Robert, if you like, I will go down to dinner."

And Sir Robert Lorme *did* like ; for, devotedly attached as he was to his young and lovely wife, he had felt the pangs of that unæsthetical thing yclept hunger pretty sharply during the last quarter of an hour.

Beaming with smiles, and looking ten times more lovely than she had done an hour before in the hall and the blue velvet, Lady Lorme came in now to the presence of the considerably discomfited Audrey, and inflicted another palpable suspense upon her.

"Ah ! I am so grieved to have kept you waiting," she began, imploringly, quitting her husband's arm and gaining his sister's side with a gliding rapidity of motion that had something fairy-like and unearthly about it ; "but what could I do, worn out and ill as I felt from the effects of the shaking railway-carriage to which we were condemned to-day ? You will forgive me—say you will forgive me, and I will never forget my duty as a hostess again so shockingly."

Audrey, so soon going to be the mistress of stately Evesham, and "half a dozen other places," as her brother had said, could well afford to laugh at this determined arrogating to herself of the rights of hostessship on the part of the diplomatic Venus whom she despaired of ever finding out—*i.e.*, "understanding," but whose *métier* she fancied it now seemed to be to will to please by a flattering rule that should alternately "bother and beguile." Of course Audrey accorded a most affectionate forgiveness for the *inhospitality* shown, and they sat down to dinner on social

roses, with the thorns all carefully nipped off, or, at least, put out of sight.

Rumours of "my lady" being a promoted "teacher" had been wafted down in some wonderful way to Combhurst, therefore the way in which she raised with her jewelled hand the jewelled eye-glass, and glanced through it round the dining-room, the walls of which were hung with fly-blown portraits of departed Lormes, was much derided by those sticklers for *caste*, the denizens of the servants' hall.

"They might ha' been the mud under her feet, through which she've trodden many and many a time, I make no doubt, and through which, the Lord be willin', she'll tread again, by the way she turned them eyes of hers upon them, and then *they* wasn't a lookin'; but *I* see it plain as plain, she dropped her eyes with the self-same look on Miss Audrey."

"Ah, get 'long, do," said Mrs. Wilson, the old housekeeper, "don't come any of your rubbidge talk here, John Povers. As if the master, bless his heart, would have brought a lady home who'd go for to drop her eyes on *Miss Audrey* unseemingly—'taint likely."

"Well, I shouldn't 'a thought it likely, but I see her do it," said John, solemnly.

Later in the evening Lady Lorme was good enough to enact a new part.

She was seated on a low velvet chair, enthroned on one side of the fireplace, and Sir Robert was doing homage over the back of it, after the manner of bridegrooms. "Are you not tired of work?" she asked of Audrey, who had been assiduously stitching a riding-collar all the evening.

"No," Audrey answered, "not at all."

"I wish you would play something to me—or, stay, I will play something to *you*, if you'll let me use your piano till my own arrives." She rose as she spoke, and was advancing to the instrument, when Meph's recumbent form met her view.

"Pretty boy," she said, waking him with a little kick, "nice dog!"

Meph protested with a deep rumbling growl against the kick, at the same time wagging his tail in acknowledgment of the polite language.

"Horrid temper he seems," said Lady Lorme, emphatically; and as she spoke, she inserted the point of her slipper into the hapless Skye's side again.

"Oh, no, he's not a bad-tempered dog, poor old pet," remonstrated Audrey, but the growl that rumbled forth in even deeper tones than before seemed to contradict her. To be roused from his evening nap, and kicked by a stranger, it was more than had ever been asked or expected of Meph before. As Lady Lorme was advancing her foot for a parting salute, Meph sprang up and seized it with an angry yap.

Once more, had Dickson been in the room, would she have had ocular demonstration as to the flashing of eyes. My lady bent down, and before her husband could interfere, she had choked the dog off; with one little white hand she held him down with a strength against which he vainly struggled, and with the other she belaboured him until his howls of rage and pain brought a passionately indignant remonstrance from the lips of his mistress. Then Lady Lorme quitted her hold, and the dog slunk away—beaten.

"Did you know that Lady Lorme reckoned dog-taming among the list of her accomplishments, Robert?" said Audrey, when the tumult was over.

"Believe me, I feared for *your* fingers," she continued, "for you had teased him into such a passion as he has never been in since I have had him."

"Sir Robert does not know half my accomplishments yet, Miss Lorme; he'll learn them in time, though, I've no doubt. Meanwhile, mark how thoroughly your dog is subdued in our first round. If we ever have another, it will end in the death of one of us; which one do you think it will be?"

"My dearest Leonie, don't jest so," interposed Sir Robert; "play me something, *anything*—or stay, play me the piece you were playing when I came into the room, and saw you for the first time."

"Why, *that*," said my lady, "was an exercise that I was teaching General Airey's stupid daughter to play! Teaching—strange, isn't it, Miss Lorme?"

CHAPTER III.

THE LEPRECHAUN RUSHES HIS FENCES.

ALL the neighbourhood came to look at—or perhaps I ought to phrase it as they did, and say to call on her in a few days, and if wishes had power to blast prosperity, my lady's career would have been withered up at once. Sir Robert Lorme had been an eligible man in that county side too long for it not to quiver with rage and hate to the soles of its daintiest Balmorals when he dared to marry in haste—a stranger.

What dinners had been given to him by fond mothers, capable, in their unselfish love for their rapidly-maturing “eldest,” of causing the junior members of the family to subsist upon cold mutton till pastoral pleasures, from their association with sheep, became odious to them. What sumptuous silks had Rugby tradespeople weekly supplied on the strength of the report of Sir Robert Lorme's attentions to various young ladies! What dozens of fair wrists had been flayed, and fingers crippled for awhile, through amateurish attempts to do for him at archery meetings! What debts had been contracted by yielding papas under their wives' representations that “it *must* come to a point soon, and then they could retrench till”—till such time as a baronet appeared on the surface again, to be hooked for the next daughter. And now the end of all these things was,

that he had gone up to London, and married a—a *nobody*.

They all came prepared to crush her when they heard that Lady Lorme was at home—came prepared to put her down and make her husband feel sorry that he had perpetrated such a mistake. But hardly had they been a moment in her presence before they were glad to hoist the white flag, and cry, from the bottom of their souls, “quarter.”

She was merciless in making them all feel that she did not acknowledge their superiority; she was terribly at her ease before them; their hearts bled to perceive that she was just a little bored. One or two of them took her on the topic of music, hoping that a consciousness of the “reports they had heard” would humble her a little. But she baffled them here completely; with her *piquant* voice just a trifle elevated that all the room might hear, she detailed some of her experiences as a teacher of music in the families of upstarts, in little accented telling sentences, that were bewitchingly effective. Then a grandiose woman, the Countess of Corbyn, daughter of a duke and wife of an earl, tried her lofty hand at putting her in her proper place, by a series of allusion-phrases to the very high and mighty stratum of society in which dukes’ daughters do dwell; but Lady Corbyn held her daggers when she found, as she did presently, that she had been simply making the running for the baronet’s lady, and that the soil she had been wont to farm with such *éclat* was taken out of her hands and tilled in a far superior manner by this new-school acquaintance.

And all the while Lady Lorme was suave and charming to a degree; she made every one of her guests uncomfortable, but she made them so in the

most polished style; they all hated her, but they could discover no flaw, no blot on the faultless surface she offered to their view.

Miss Lorme felt rather dull in these days, for Lord Evesham found business in London which detained him on and on indefinitely, and Sir Robert was always on duty with his bride.

When a man of thirty-seven gives the reins of his heart, head, and understanding into female hands, he does it entirely, and never thinks of attempting to get the bit between his teeth. Lady Lorme ruled her husband with a rod of iron, and he liked it, and thought it sweet.

There were great doings at Combhurst soon. She disliked going out to people's dreary houses, she said, but she gave dinners and balls at her own lavishly. And masculine Warwickshire bent the knee in adoration before her, and won nothing in return for its service but the tips of her dainty fingers, and level glances of something that would have been scorn if the smile on the lips had not seemed to contradict it, from the grey velvet eyes. And in the midst of it all November was born and nearly buried, and Lord Evesham came back with the bracelet.

Miss Lorme retained her own room and her own habits undisturbed, for they were not too congenial these sisters, though they kissed each other on the cheek, and called each other dear; and it was to Audrey's room, which she didn't call her boudoir, that Lord Evesham turned his steps when he came over to pay his long-deferred *devoirs* to my lady.

Lord Evesham's business had been tedious and wearing; that Audrey declared she could see at once, for he looked pale, and wan, and weary.

"What had it been about?" she asked, "estates, or settlements, or anything that she could understand, connected with business?"

Audrey had a kind of undeveloped notion that when a man was about to marry, the "settling up" and turning over a new leaf might be a troublesome proceeding.

He explained matters as clearly and succinctly as a man ever can or will explain matters to a woman, however near and dear she may be to him. He had been bothered and worried, he said; looking over old estate-deeds was dry work; lawyers in office hours were dry beings; but all that sort of thing was over now, and he only hoped Lorme would think he had acted as it behoved him to act in his position.

This was all very well; no expectant bridegroom could be expected to say more. To Audrey he was all that a man about to marry a woman in a fortnight should be to that woman: the chivalrous devotion of the lover was already tinged with the more sober and deeper respect of the husband. He seemed, in fact, to love Miss Lorme very dearly, and to lean upon her in a measure.

"And, by-the-bye, I have not thought of it before, how do you like your sister-in-law?" he asked, suddenly, when their interview in Miss Lorme's room had lasted for about half an hour.

"Fred, she's incomprehensible, utterly incomprehensible to me."

Miss Lorme rose as she said it, and pensively balanced her right foot on the fender, and her hands in her waistcoat pockets.

"Why?—what is there extraordinary about her?"

"Oh, nothing extraordinary in an *outré* sense; she

is perfection in appearance and manners; she never fails in her 'part,' and—putting her determination to rule absolutely in the house out of court—she is all that a sister-in-law should be."

"And how as to her as a wife?"

"Well, I own I am bewildered, Fred; if she adored Robert she would behave exactly as she does behave, and yet——"

"‘And yet’ what, Audrey?"

"I do not think she does adore him. Perhaps the expecting such a thing as adoration may seem extravagant, and the speaking of it at all absurd; but it will not seem so to you after an hour's observance of my lady's manners and customs. She kneels down before Robert's chair, and bends her graceful head down when she's asking for a trifle sometimes; and she'll sit on the ground at his feet, and she'll walk with him half-way down the avenue of a morning when he's going to ride over the land; and she'll plod with her mites of delicately-kidded feet over ploughed fields with him, and nurse one of his sick pointers, and never rest for an instant while he is out of the house; and yet for all that I doubt the depth of her love for him."

"God of heaven!" cried Lord Evesham, hastily starting to his feet; "what more would you have her do?—she does all this, does she?—it's sickening, absolutely sickening to hear it?"

"You wont say so when you have seen her, Fred: you will think then that if it's genuine, my lady's is the most graceful affection that anybody ever evinced for anybody else yet in the world. But I often see her eyes when she does not happen to know that their sheeny velvet glances are visible to me, and they have

taught me to doubt her affection for my brother, and to believe in the doctrine of the transmigration of souls."

"How so?"

"There's a double look in them; they are the loveliest eyes in the world, Fred, you will acknowledge *that*, even if I wickedly prejudice you against her: some eastern queen has looked like my lady does on a serpent about to sting her; and the serpent has looked back with the *other* glance that lives in Lady Lorme's eyes upon the Eastern queen."

"In fact," said Lord Evesham, laughing, "she's a combination of Cleopatra and the asp, according to your account. Come on, I am getting anxious to be introduced to Lady Lorme."

They left Audrey's room, and walked through the hall and into drawing and dining-rooms without finding her; and then they looked in the library, and she wasn't there; and then Audrey gaily continuing the search—for she was in exuberant spirits naturally enough at Evesham's return—went upstairs, and in my lady's chamber she found Dickson ready with the information that "my lady had gone out to ride with Sir Robert."

"She has gone out to try the Leprechaun colt, Fred, I find; I forgot it before, but I remember now that Robert planned a surprise for her this morning—the gift of the nicest horse in his stable he considers it; you know the Leprechaun?"

"Isn't he that good-looking brown with a white off fore-leg?"

"Yes; he has only lately come home from the breaker's, and I fancy Robert intended him for me, for he is perfectly trained for a lady. But the other day

Lady Lorme began the subject of riding, and from her tone Robert as well as I discovered that she had more than a *penchant* for it ; he told me after that he should give her the Leprechaun."

"She will look splendid on horseback," said Lord Evesham, eagerly ; "let us go out and see them come up the avenue."

"How do *you* know how she will look ?"

"I can judge pretty well from your description of her," he answered, rather testily. "Ugly women look well on horseback generally—pretty ones divine."

"We shall see them very well from this window, Fred," said Miss Lorme, going to it. "I don't relish the idea of going out in the cold to get a passing glimpse—for that is all we should get by going into the avenue. Lady Lorme is too good a judge of effect to suffer a hasty introduction ; she would not pull up."

"Audrey," said Lord Evesham, suddenly coming up close behind and smoothing her chestnut hair with a caressing softness that is strangely pleasant to a woman from the hand of the man she loves—"Audrey, I think I shall let Evesham for a time ; I dislike English life and the English climate, and if you have no objection to the plan, I should rather go abroad for a few years."

"Anywhere with you," said the girl, cordially and fondly ; "you will find me willing to live wherever you like, Fred. But isn't this rather a sudden resolution ?"

No, he said, he had been thinking of it for some time. And then there was a silence, a happy silence on the girl's part, for she was following out the train of thought his proposition had aroused. "A life abroad," in the sunny South probably, with the man

she loved ; no, Audrey asked for nothing better, nothing brighter, nothing happier than this.

They came after a time, slinging up the avenue at a sharp trot, and Lord Evesham's prophecy was right. Lady Lorme did look splendid. At the first glance you could tell that the square seat and the light hand were not superficially gained things.

"Fred," Audrey exclaimed, admiringly, as Lady Lorme reined up sharply, and leant forward, patting the brown colt's neck, "my brother's wife is fairer than the fairest dream of woman that anybody can ever have had ; isn't she superb ?"

"Yes, she's rather pretty," said Lord Evesham, hesitatingly.

Lady Lorme in her hat and habit never for an instant lost sight of her tender delicacy—her *piquant* reliance on her husband—her thousand little feminine airs and graces. Some women rush into Amazonianisms as soon as they doff crinoline and a bonnet, and hold their whips under their arms in a way they would die rather than hold their parasols. They step, too, more determinately very often, and speak louder when in a horsey atmosphere, and altogether try to unsex themselves a little—just enough to correspond with their costume. But Lady Lorme knew better. She rode magnificently ; she mounted well, she sat well, she handled his mouth well, and she rode judiciously ; and with all this she was the thorough lady still. She did not become a diluted jockey the moment she touched the saddle, though the most casual observer could see at once that she was perfectly at home there.

She came into the room where Lord Evesham stood awaiting his introduction to her with his back to the

window—came in with her gliding grace of motion, and the wild rose blooming brightly in her most lovely face ; and when she had advanced a yard or two into the room, she paused and looked at him.

With a strange look for a young hostess to give a stranger guest—especially when that guest is a gentleman on the brink of matrimony with her own sister-in-law—it was a glance of thrilling interrogation, and yet of most biting scorn, that went out of those dark-grey velvet eyes, and fastened itself on the countenance of the man to whom she presently bowed with her sweetest grace, and offered her hand in the most gracious manner, and welcomed to her “husband’s house as her husband’s future brother.”

Sudden as the glance had been, and suddenly as the glance had been quelled, one had seen it who would have given a year of her life *not* to have seen it. Had not that look shown knowledge of Lord Evesham in other days ? With the proud, fearless honesty of her nature and her race, she resolved upon hearing the truth at once.

“You have known Lord Evesham before, though, I imagine, Leonie,” she said ; “I need not have introduced you.”

“You are mistaken, then, in your imaginings,” said Lady Lorme, coolly. “I never saw Lord Evesham before to-day.”

“What, then,” thought Audrey, “could that fell glance of hers mean ?”

She sat down to luncheon in her habit, taking her hat off, and throwing it down on a chair behind her, and proving satisfactorily by the perfect organization of her glossy tresses, that she was not one of that unfortunate and unpleasant race who always come in

towsled from a ride. And she was more graceful and feminine in the tight, plain, dark-cloth body and sleeves than any other woman could have been with all her feminine paraphernalia of silks and laces and ribbons about her. Sir Robert Lorme felt that she was so, and Sir Robert Lorme looked his triumph at the undoubted success his brilliant, beautiful bride was achieving before his fastidious friend.

As for the fastidious friend, his late business trials told upon him more and more as the luncheon went on : his paleness became pallor, and his weariness dejection.

"I want Leonie to let me give her another horse," said Sir Robert, after a time, in allusion to the Leprechaun ; "not but what she rides him admirably ; but she means to course with me, and the Leprechaun rushes his fences rather wildly."

"A horse that does that is a bad mount for a lady," opined Lord Evesham. "You had better agree to a change, Lady Lorme ; a horse who rushes things wildly will never wait for a safe lead, and is apt, into the bargain, to get other horses into mischief."

Lady Lorme's eyes were fixed on her plate while he was speaking, but she raised them when he concluded, and—could Audrey be mistaken a second time—there was the self-same glance that had been in them when she first caught sight of Lord Evesham.

"I will bear what you say in mind ; believe me, I will be very careful, and if I promise *that*, I am sure Robert will let me keep the horse ; in fact, what you have said about his being 'dangerous' to other horses will effectually prevent *my* being rash at all, for I shall only ride with my husband."

Admirable young matron !

CHAPTER IV.

LADY LORME TAKES THE BRACELET, AND LORD
EVESHAM AT A DISADVANTAGE.

LADY LORME did not generally linger long over the luncheon-table ; to say the truth, her ladyship found a family party tedious, and so, on ordinary occasions, was glad enough to get out of the way of their discovering that she did find it so, hastily. But to-day she lingered in the dining-room long after the last succulent morsel had been despatched—lingered, too, not unwillingly, but with an evident determination to stay as long as the rest did.

It was very aggravating, for she wanted them out of the room ; but both Sir Robert and his sister showed an inclination to remain where they were, also. Sir Robert had opened a topic he loved with his far from apparently enthusiastic brother-elect. This topic was hunting ; the nobleman who had hunted the fox-hounds for many years was just dead, and it was a great question in the county whether or not Lord Evesham could be persuaded into taking them. Sir Robert, in numerous conversations with many of his neighbours, had so far presumed on his approaching relationship with Lord Evesham, as to hold out great hopes that he *would* take them, and to be very sanguine altogether as to the superior way in which “Evesham would hunt them, and keep up the whole thing, if he did take them.”

"There's a capital site for the kennel over at Evesham," he continued, "and it will be keeping up the character of the hunt better than if it's allowed to subside into a mere subscription pack."

"But I don't think I shall be much at Evesham for some years to come," said Lord Evesham, when Sir Robert had wound up with this eloquent appeal.

"Not be much at Evesham? what on earth do you mean?" exclaimed Sir Robert. "Not be much at Evesham! I cannot part with Audrey," said my lady.

"I mean exactly what I say," said Lord Evesham, answering Sir Robert, and allowing his hostess's speech to pass unnoticed. "I wish to live abroad, and Audrey is willing to live abroad; so the end of it is that abroad we shall live for some time to come; you had better take the pack yourself, Robert."

"Ah! it is not the pack I am thinking of now," said Sir Robert, getting up and crossing over to his sister. "Audrey, dear," he continued, bending down and kissing her on the forehead, "I needn't tell you how sorry I am that Fred and you have come to this conclusion. I little thought that when that day we have all been looking forward to as such a happy one *did* arrive, that I should give my sister away literally."

"Don't say that, Robert; neither time nor distance can estrange *us*; we shall meet often, I hope; and Leonie," she continued, turning to the lustrous face that was bent attentively upon all three, "*you* like the continent, I know; you must persuade Robert to leave his dear old Combhurst sometimes, and come and see us; will you?"

"Yes," Lady Lorme said, "when they were married

she had no doubt that Robert and herself would frequently give themselves the felicity of going to gaze on their happiness."

This being one of those speeches which are unanswerable, conversation flagged, and presently Lady Lorme rose and proposed an adjournment.

Audrey and Lord Evesham were going out in Audrey's pony-carriage ; Sir Robert followed his sister out of the room when the latter left it, saying she would go and dress, so for one moment the hostess and her guest were alone in the room. He paused at the door, for he, too, had meditated a hasty exit apparently—paused, and held the door open, with a haughty inclination of his head to the lady in indication of his desire that she would pass out before him.

"So, my lord," she said, stopping suddenly when she was close to him, "you will not remain at Evesham ? I had hoped to have you for a neighbour."

She had laid her hand on the one of his that was holding the door open—laid it on with a gentle pleading clasp at first, but as she concluded her sentence she tightened it to a strong grasp, and at the same time pushed the door from his hold and shut it.

He shook her off, apologized for his roughness instantaneously, and attempted to pass her.

"Wont you let me speak to you for a moment ?" she asked, as he opened the door, and again she laid that firm little white hand of hers on his arm.

"Not for one moment, Lady Lorme," he answered, and

"Oh, you coward !" was her comment on his refusal.

Lady Lorme went along through the hall, and up

the wide staircase, with her face unruffled, her lips smiling, despite her angry words. Went along hall and staircase and corridor, and into her own room ; and when she reached it and found it empty, she dropped the unruffled look, and the smile, and the regard for appearances, and the gliding pace of motion, and sprang to the sofa, with her hands clutching at her glossy dark hair, and buried her face in the cushions, and gave vent to a stormily spasmodic burst of execrations and ejaculations for a few minutes.

The room was completely metamorphosed. When a bride on the night of her arrival in her adoring husband's halls finds fault with the fittings-up of those portions specially dedicated to herself, the chances are considerably in favour of those things with which she has found fault being speedily removed. Lady Lorme's dressing-room was now worthy of the honour of being the casket for so fair a jewel as herself.

It was a turret-room, and its walls and toilette-table, its couch and easy-chairs, were all draped with rich crimson silk ; all its appointments, too, were ruby, Bohemian glass, and silver, and scentless flowers of gorgeous hue bloomed luxuriantly in its solitary window. Therefore as far as outward appearances went, all was *couleur de rose*.

Ah, these "outward appearances !" how vilely, mockingly deceptive they are. How often, when the physical path is over Turkey carpets and polished boards, is the mental and moral one over ice of the thinnest and ways of the thorniest. How hollow, what seems substantial ! How wicked, what shows to the world as virtuous ! How Godless your Sunday pietist ! How glitter may dazzle the eyes of the casual observer to the weight of the cross of iron that is

borne on some uncomplaining breast ! How poverty brightens up, and makes the best of itself ! How hate decks itself in the garb of loving-kindness ; how envy swears it is only gentle tender interest ! How family quarrels huddle themselves out of sight at the sound of the visitor's knock. How—but I may as well leave these moralizings till I write an essay against “outward appearances.”

Suffice it to say then here, that the outward appearances which would lead one to suppose that all was *couleur de rose* in the interior of that extravagantly-bedecked little dressing-room—the soft glowing rich hue shone not in the soul of its lovely mistress—all was blank desolation there, and grey despair.

“The coward !” she kept on reiterating from between her clenched teeth—“the coward ! not to give me a word of recognition or comfort ; to be so careful of the dignity of that pink and white piece of delicate china, that he must act his lie even when we were alone together. I'll *make* him feel ;—I'll *make* him speak ; I'll——” She had not time to say what else she would do, for there came a knock at the door.

In a moment she had started up, and was standing before the glass with her hair let down and her face toned back to its normal state of lustrous beauty, and in another moment her voice was perfectly under command, and she was capable of uttering, with all her usual fascination of tone and manner, the words “Come in !”

And then the door opened, and Audrey Lorme came in, with a little leather case in her hand.

“Oh !” said Lady Lorme, languidly, “I thought it was Dickson come to take off my habit ; I have been

here ever so long" (the time had seemed long to her) "waiting."

Audrey explained that she had merely come in for a minute to offer her wedding-gift—a trifle, and a long-delayed one ; but Evesham had been commissioned to get it, and she had left the choice of it entirely to him, as in her (Audrey's) opinion his taste was good.

"Oh, faultless!" Lady Lorme assented quickly, and then she took the case and opened it, and gazed, as Audrey thought, with almost too absorbed admiration on the bracelet which reposed in it.

As a bracelet it deserved the enrapt regard bestowed upon it—as a gift it deserved something more. It was a broad band of brilliants and opals, with a pendant locket thickly studded with the same stones.

"The locket opens in two places in a most peculiar manner," said Audrey at last, feeling that though it was an awkward thing for her to break the silence, it would be a still more awkward thing for her to allow it to continue unbroken: "it's a mysterious little locket ; shall I show you how it opens?"

To her surprise Lady Lorme achieved the opening it even as she spoke.

"I must have pressed by accident on the right stone," she said. "Audrey, it is a magnificent present! I can never thank you sufficiently for giving, or Lord Evesham for getting it for me."

And then the two ladies kissed each other, after the manner of women when a present has passed from one to the other, and, indeed, on all the important occasions of life ; and Audrey, feeling that she could now leave the room without embarrassment, sketchily stated that she wanted Robert to give her some money,

as she probably should go to one of the neighbouring towns and buy something, walked out, leaving Lady Lorme still standing with the bracelet in her hand.

Presently she opened the door, and—it was a mean thing, but she was capable of worse than that—listened. She heard her husband shout out—

“Go to the library, Audrey, will you, and I’ll be with you in a minute.”

She watched that minute pass according to the clock on her mantel-piece with bated breath, and then she tore off her habit, and dressed herself in her voluminous crinolines and trailing silks, with a rapidity that would have caused Dickson’s hair to stand upon end with great awe. And then she rushed down-stairs noiselessly, and into the drawing-room, where she found Lord Evesham.

She was by his side before he saw her enter, her hand was on his own, and she was flashing the jewels before his eyes.

“What made *you* select this as a wedding-gift from *your* affianced bride to *me*?” she asked, in a hissing whisper.

“I don’t know,” he answered doggedly, after an instant. “I was foolish to do it; I did not mean to hurt your feelings.”

“You have not done so; now be quick in replying to all I may ask you, or down goes your fabric of happiness, for Audrey Lorme will come in and find us. Your bringing me that bracelet makes me think you more of a man than I did just now; it shows to me clearly and well that you remember what is past. Now—why did you leave me?”

“I obeyed your command.”

“What! a woman’s outbreak of impatience, and

you took advantage of it : why did you conceal your accession to fortune and title, Frederick Compton ?”

“What would have been the use of letting you know it?” he asked, impatiently. “We were separated—parted by your own will and wish. I had formed another attachment—that is to say——” he stammered.

“Go on,” she interrupted, scornfully.

“That is to say, my love for you was weakened ; I believed that you had ceased to care for me ; there would have been folly under these circumstances in seeking to renew the dream that you yourself awoke me from.”

She thought for a moment ; he was a lord—rich, with a place in the land far higher than any mere baronet could attain ; then she spoke.

“And I love you still, Fred ! Heaven help me ! *how* dearly I can never tell. One word of soothing for the poor wretch who has blighted her life, under the impression that it could never be re-united with yours. Had I been a free woman—were I a free woman—would you fulfil the vow you once made me ?”

Poor Lord Evesham was in a pitiable place : he was in the house of a friend, and that friend’s wife was making love to him and raking up old memories of the days gone by, when he had thought she was going to be *his* wife. Added to which, the girl to whom he was betrothed was liable to come in at any moment. She wasn’t free, and there was not the remotest possibility of her being free till he was himself bound to the girl he now most dearly loved, indissolubly ; he had been passionately attached to the lovely Leonie ; there could be no harm, he thought, in telling a white lie, since it would soothe her.

"Yes, I would," was the result of his cogitations ; and then they heard footsteps approaching, and Lady Lorme was herself again, and able to go forward and show the "beautiful present" to her husband.

Sweet little woman ! who would have thought—here, again, outward appearances were so fair—that she nourished a black pain and a black crime in her heart, as she stood talking leisurely to Audrey, and Sir Robert, and Lord Evesham, and Meph. She caught up the white Skye in her arms, and disregarding his cross growls, carried him to the door to see his mistress off. She was quite bright, and sparkling, and vivacious. No one would have thought that she had been clenching her hands, and tearing her hair, and moaning up in the privacy of her own room ten minutes before. Still less would any one have thought who witnessed the clinging affection with which she hung on Sir Robert's arm—have deemed that five minutes before she had been passionately abjuring another man to tell her that he loved her still, and informing him that her marriage had blighted her life. Consummate little actress ! how admirable her tact would have been if she had not a soul to be blackened by such falsehood, to be lost through such vile deception and trickery. She even gaily called out a laughing order for some lollipops to Lord Evesham, and merrily wished them a pleasant drive. And then she went back into the house with her husband and entreated him not to leave her all the afternoon—or at any rate, if he must go out over part of the land, to let her walk with him. In fact, if Sir Robert Lorme had not believed before that my lady adored and would go through fire and water for him, he would have been justified in believing it from this date.

Later, when the dull November day was closing in, she went to the glowing turret-room again, and Dickson was summoned, and the shrine was brilliantly illuminated, and then Lady Lorme achieved a ravishing toilette.

The robes she wore were always rich and rare, but to-night she was resolved to excel herself, and to dazzle the man who had confessed that he loved her still, even when the beauty he had once idolized had been simply set off by the riding-habit. "Would not that beauty win his heart yet more through his eyes," she thought, "when set off by splendour?"

So my lady was robed in a clouded white *moire*, covered with a light running pattern of delicate white velvet leaves; and over this she wore the tiniest white velvet Zouave jacket, embroidered with the matchless gold tracery of Corfu; this jacket was fastened at the throat with a diamond and opal clasp, and its sleeves falling wide and open from the elbow, left one lovely arm entirely bare, while on the other sparkled Audrey's present to her—yet not Audrey's present either, for *that* she had safely locked away in a drawer. Besides, in this locket, had she opened it, might have been seen a pair of exquisitely-painted miniatures; and the painting on the one side represented with rare fidelity the face of Lord Evesham, and the painting on the other side the face of Lady Lorme.

CHAPTER V.

THE UNSELFISH WISH.

“Well, peace to thy heart, tho’ another’s it be,
And health to thy cheek, though it bloom not for me.

WHEN Moore wrote these lines he had ceased to care for, or at least to *love*, the apostrophised one. We don’t wish the one—the cherished one—all manner of good things as the bride of another, while we still retain desires that she should have been our own. Peace to the heart that has been false to us may be wished, but *not* while that heart is still the dearest image on earth to us. Health to the cheek is a thing that men don’t pray for when the owner of the cheek has first proved fickle or meanly jilted them; they do that when the lady is superseded in their hearts and imaginations, but not before—not while the wound is young.

Lord Evesham had prepared for the interview with the woman who had once had the power to sway his soul powerfully with mixed feelings. He had dreaded the display of any lingering feelings of tenderness towards himself on the part of this lustrous-eyed Venus; he had writhed under the thought that possibly she might display tenderness towards her lord. Now this last was a very wrong thing, and he soon killed it; but he found himself so wrought upon by Audrey’s story of Leonie’s devotion to Robert, that he did not care to have Leonie herself come and hammer the fact down

harder. Leonie was not a woman that you could love one day and leave off loving the next; she was formed to hold as well as to win, and though Lord Evesham was very loyal in his soul to Audrey, he had loved Leonie very dearly in the days that had gone by.

He had met her under romantic circumstances, and these had first roused his interest and then excited his love. Staying one night at an hotel in Marseilles *en route* to the East, he had been disturbed by a wild commotion and a general uproar, amongst which the shrill voices of his countrywomen were terribly apparent. As a rule, Fred Compton troubled himself little and cared less as to the affairs of his compatriots abroad; but on this occasion he happened to ask what had caused the row, and from information received he gathered that an English milord and his lady had quarrelled on account of a cousin of the latter. Pursuing the subject further, that the lady was querulous, middle-aged, and plain—that the lord was gay and gallant to the cousin, who was young and lovely. The lady, he heard, had gone off in a rage, carrying with her husband, courier, luggage—in fact, all her belongings save and except her cousin, whom she had left behind her in a fit of jealous frenzy and weak spleen, penniless, helpless, and alone.

When a mean, cowardly, cruel wrong is wrought upon a woman, you will generally find, if you search into the case, that another woman is at the bottom of it. When a blow in the dark falls on a feminine head, be sure that it is dealt by a feminine hand. When a condemnatory tone pervades a speech that is uttered relative to a girl who has neither of those mighty barriers, “care and cash,” surrounding her, doubt not for an instant that it is spoken by a woman. Men never

descend to such depths of base bitterness as do the ministering angels of our hearts, homes, and lives.

The being meanly suspected of a vile wrong by the only relative she had left in the world to claim kith and kin with, turned the milk of human kindness sour in the breast of poor Leonie Powers. Young, beautiful, an orphan, and—harder than all else to endure—poor, she had sweetened the bread and water of dependence on her ungenial cousin by a sort of half-friendly, half-sisterly intercourse with that cousin's husband. The intercourse was harmless enough, God knows, and poor enough in its compensating powers for the numerous trials, hardships, and mortifications of her life; but it was the brightest thing she had in her gloomy daily path, and its brightness was soon sullied therefore, and clouded.

The man was a fool—a vain, handsome, weak fool, but nothing worse; the wife was a hard, ugly, vain, selfish woman, nothing better. The result was that through masculine folly and feminine unkindness and low, pettifogging jealousy, suspicion fell upon one whose heart and life were pure and open then, and perverted the nature formed for better things.

She was left alone—alone in Marseilles—alone in the world, for the wife was rich and the husband poor, and he liked his bread buttered thickly too well to risk angering his wife by asking for justice for poor Leonie. Alone, with little money and fewer friends; alone in a foreign land and in a fashionable place.

But the girl had a spirit that quailed at nothing, and dreaded nothing, and dared anything—a spirit that had made her race noble and feared in the days when they had a name in the green isle from whence she came—a spirit that misfortune could not daunt,

that loved difficulties and dangers for the sake of overcoming them, but that burned to be revenged upon one who had cast the semblance of the shade of dishonour on her—that seethed to take a higher place in the world than the woman who had spurned her could boast—that panted and throbbed to attain a position from whence she could look in scorn on the cold, heartless cousin who had steeped her soul in the waters of bitterness.

She wanted no help, she claimed no protection; she told her story with haughty frankness, and defied censure. The consul came to see her, and she was polite, but not grateful; the consul's wife called, and Miss Powers was affable, but absorbed; the fact was, she explained, that she "was anxious about getting music lessons." And very soon she got them; and when she had given them long enough to establish a claim to recommendations, she left Marseilles and came back to London; and all this time Fred Compton, instead of being in the land of the cypress and myrtle, was following her like her shadow, and worshipping her in silence.

They met at last, and then he spoke, and she listened eagerly enough, for by marriage alone could she gain the place she wanted, and the power to sting socially the one who had stung her. He was young, clever, handsome, well-born, well-bred, well-connected, but, alas! he was not *rich*. She accepted him, and determined to wait for awhile, and take the goods the gods gave her in the interim; and so for a time Fred Compton was happy and contented, and believed his betrothed to be the same. And it was during this calm that the miniatures were taken, and the diamond and opal bracelet purchased.

At last she tired, not so much of the lover as at the poor prospects that lover could offer. He began to feel that she was interested; he strove to keep her heart by freely showing her his love and trust and confidence in her, and without any appeal to certain faint hopes he had of succeeding to a title and estates and wealth, and all the rest of the things she longed for—and he failed. With words of prudence she counselled the closing of their intercourse, the cancelling of their vows. She was cold, cautious, calculating. He could not win her from her purpose of parting with him, so he left with his heart wrung and wounded, and his faith in womankind considerably weakened.

Now the tables were turned. When he heard from Audrey Lorme that her brother had married a Leonie Powers, his heart had gone quicker than was well at the thought of this woman from whom he had parted in anger five years before. He had even avoided seeing her till he had used himself to the fact of her being another man's wife; with a touch of the old romance he had bought a trinket like one he had given her when he had deemed himself dear to her, half hoping that it might awaken kindly, tender thoughts in her breast towards himself. He had no intention of rousing the torrent of passion that he had aroused; the woman frightened him with her vehemence and her wildness, and her power of subduing both when others approached; he turned with a feeling of fatigue from her to the calm haven of rest a union with Audrey would afford. Altogether, Lord Evesham felt that she was a dangerous woman to deal with, this once adored, grey-eyed Venus, and to wish that he was safely clear of Combhurst with his own wife.

Meanwhile my lady was chewing the cud of disappointed mortification ; she had whistled Fred Compton down the wind because he was poor and unimportant ; and now here, after she had married a baronet for whom she was beginning to entertain a mild feeling of distaste, Fred Compton came on the surface again, and crossed her path with all that this world has to bestow of titles and riches and honours.

“*If* I had only been free,” she muttered, fiercely ; “*if* I had not been plodding along my sordid way so grovellingly, I should have known him—heard of him as an earl ; but I never cared to look at papers, and *I*, a music-mistress, was never thrown with any of his friends. I should have been a countess if I could have waited. I could have put my foot on the necks of those who slighted and stung me in old times.”

And then Lady Lorme clenched her little hands together till the veins stood up like cords on their backs, and ground her glittering teeth till Dickson suffered from “goose-flesh.”

Then a more composed stage followed ; she sat down on the couch, and indulged in dreams of what she would have been if she *had* been a countess. With her beauty and her grace, her talent and wit, her rare accomplishments and matchless fascination, these dreams were not absurd. She pictured herself leading the fashions, and being queen of the most select *coterie* in London ; she saw herself ruling in that world of *ton* at which she had gazed as an outsider. She fancied the “sensation” that she would have caused when first that world saw her in the coronet of a countess. And then she thought of the humdrum life that would be hers probably in Warwickshire, and she loathed her position and her husband.

Inordinately ambitious, extravagantly beautiful, extravagantly vain, and fond of display and splendour, brilliant as a diamond, and hard as one, Lady Lorme, as she sat on the couch with her dainty fingers twisting the bracelet round and round her fair white arm, was as much to be dreaded as a hungry panther. Utterly fearless, utterly unscrupulous, with a mind capable of planning much, and a will capable of carrying out unflinchingly whatever she planned, with such beauty as an angel might have envied, and a horrible gnawing at her soul, she sat there a thing to be admired, feared, and fled from.

The flickering firelight fell on her head and brow as she sat there brooding over her fancied wrongs and disappointments ; the sheeny, silvery light of the wax candles in the toilet-glass fell on her rich white robe, and made it silvery too ; and in the mingled light the embroidered jacket sparkled and glittered with gorgeous effect. An Eastern queen ! Not even Cleopatra could have been fairer, for she could do no more than make " defect perfection," and that did Lady Lorme.

At last—what thought could have crossed her mind ?—she started from her seat with a low cry of almost horror ; a gasping, stifled cry it was, and it seemed to rend her lips asunder, and to come fraught with agony from her heart. Heaven help the woman who utters that kind of cry, for either a horrible crime or a horrible fear oppresses her.

She started up with her hands spread out before her face, as if she would shut out some horrible vision ; and then she tore them down with an effort, and looked at her face in the glass, and shuddered, and trembled, and panted. The face she saw was livid, the lips were bloodless, the brow livid, and the eyes—

those soft, grey, velvet eyes—were flaming like coals of fire. No wonder that, seeing such a face as this, my lady should shudder, and tremble, and pant. It was a face that it is not well to see.

“What *can* I do?” she muttered to herself, after a minute or two, and Dickson, in the next room, heard the mutterings, and thought her mistress called her; so she came, and was dismissed with a sharp reprimand. But the break to her thoughts had been sufficient; they would not disorder her again, now they had been interrupted in such a commonplace manner.

“*She* shall never rule in the place that ought to have been mine—of that I’m fully determined; so I must *do* the best I can and befriend myself, since I am not likely to get any one to aid me in such an undertaking. Oh! that something would happen that I could be free to claim his promise before the next maddening fortnight has passed, at the end of which I shall lose (or gain) Lord Evesham *for ever!*”

It was evident that Lady Lorme could *not* wish “health” to Lord Evesham’s “cheek,” and “peace” to Lord Evesham’s “mind,” under the circumstances by which he was surrounded. Her ladyship did not pause to reflect, or if she did, the reflection brought no comfort to her, that she herself was to blame for all that was unpleasant to herself in her life. If she had not banished Fred Compton, she would have married Lord Evesham. Her principal rage was directed against Audrey, for that young lady having had the audacity to step into her place; and next in order of hatred, after Audrey, came Audrey’s brother.

He had been kind to her, and generous and loving to a degree; and now not one of these things softened her bitter feeling against him for standing in the way

of her attaining the heights she would have pawned her soul to gain. She had nourished ambition, and hatred, and revenge in her heart so long that they had blackened it, and made it dense to the perception of the line between right and wrong. In fact, fair and soft, gentle and sweet as she was outwardly, she was unsexed by the cruelty of her own heart and feelings, and was a woman no longer in her soul.

When the clock struck seven my lady rose, and now she could gaze in the glass with pleasure again, for the wild-rose bloom had come back, and the lustre of her face had renewed itself. Once more the full sweet lips pouted rosily; once more the smooth brow and cheek were unruffled; once more the light came softly shaded by the long lashes from those glorious eyes. Once more the tension was removed from the lip and the mind; and once more lovely Lady Lorme was herself again.

She had dressed to some purpose; she saw that the moment she entered the drawing-room where Sir Robert, and Audrey, and Lord Evesham awaited her. Her husband came to meet her with unchecked pride in her radiant grace and tastefully set-off beauty. Audrey complimented her upon her appearance in the *piquant* little jacket; and a sort of half-frightened admiration came into Lord Evesham's eyes, and made the arm on which the hostess leant on her way to the dining-room a trembling one.

All through the dinner my lady never flagged. How gay she was!—how witty, and bright, and vivacious! She startled Audrey, and enchanted Sir Robert, and puzzled Lord Evesham.

"Well, since she can carry on like *this*," he thought, "I *may* hope, I suppose, that she wont attack me any

more ;” and, like a wise man, he prayed most fervently to be delivered from the temptation. “She’s made me tell one falsehood,” he thought ; “for if she was free fifty times over, I wouldn’t change Audrey for her.” And Lord Evesham pitied his friend profoundly for having such an excitable wife, instead of envying him for having such a charming one.

They might have known that one chord was wrongly strung, if they had only paused to think of those three luckless ones who were so unconscious. In a party of four, something must have been false for the evening to seem sombre and dull as it did, when a bridegroom and his bride, a lover and his betrothed made the quartette. My lady seemed to lull down as the hours passed on, and at last she took refuge in the assertion that she had a nervous headache. So Sir Robert piled the cushions up comfortably on the most luxurious couch in the room, and placed thereon with the tenderest care the richly robed form of his enchantress, and she lay there with her filmy handkerchief pressed against her brow, weaving her spells still more strongly around him as he sat by her side. Sir Robert was happy enough, but somehow or other the atmosphere seemed oppressive to both Audrey and Lord Evesham.

CHAPTER VI.

BRAVE HEART.

HAS a period ever been passed by you, reader of these pages, which, without being absolutely unfortunate, has been provokingly unlucky—a period when the friend you liked best in the world was either sent to the other end of it on a special mission to the most unscrupulous of cannibals, or went into those paths of life at home into which many things forbade your following him—a period when the run of luck was constantly on the *noir*, while you, in pursuance of some pertinaciously followed plan, betted as constantly on the *rouge*—a period when your boot crushed your foot ruthlessly whenever you wanted to walk the earth, without any visible cause—a period when all the gloves you became possessed of split up the centre, leaving the palm of your hand exposed when you did not want the palm of your hand exposed—a period when the letters from the friends you loved went to enlighten the minds and enliven the tedium of the clerks in the dead-letter office, while the ones from the friends you hated arrived with maddening regularity—a period when your pet pug strayed from his home, and caused you much anguish—a period when your dinners were perpetually under or over cooked ; and your richest relations, from whom you had expectations, and who were also fastidious to a degree, were always coming in to dine with you—a period when the boldest,

blackest, and most legible of caligraphy could not keep things "right side up?" If such a period has ever been passed by you, you will understand and sympathize with the anger and annoyance of Audrey Lorme, when the different days appointed for the arrival of the different articles of her *trousseau* came round, and the millinery itself came not.

There was dire wrath and confusion and commotion at Combhurst; not alone on the part of Audrey, but on the part of Lord Evesham. He was livid with fury when the special messenger despatched to Swan and Edgar's, to Eagle's, to Howell and James's, and Harry Emanuel's, brought back from each and every place the same answer, which was to the following effect:—That a gentleman, looking like a lawyer, had been shown Miss Lorme's written direction that the things should be handed over to him, and paid the sum due for them on the spot. There had been no robbery; for the articles in every case that had been handed over to him, full payment had been made, but there had been a forgery, for no such document had ever been signed by Audrey Lorme.

Lady Lorme was voluble in her prettily uttered regret that such an unforeseen circumstance should have arisen to delay the marriage; Sir Robert was savagely indignant with the originator of so bold and daring a robbery. "But it had not delayed the marriage, I should think," he added, when the special messenger had narrated and re-narrated all he had heard. "Audrey can get up a wardrobe after her marriage, as well as before."

"Yes," Lord Evesham interrupted, eagerly, "in Paris."

But this my lady would not hear of for an instant.

What! *her* sister-in-law go from *her* house to be married in aught but the garments befitting the bride's future high station and her (Lady Lorme's) own! No, no; the wedding must be put off. New things must be ordered. All could be re-arranged by the first week in January. The end of it was, that the husband conquered the brother, and Sir Robert came round to his wife's view of the case.

In vain Lord Evesham grumbled and protested; there was no appeal for him, for Audrey was too indignant with my lady to interfere.

"For the sake of *us all*, let it be when we always meant it to be, Robert," said Lord Evesham; "you don't know what cursed mischief may come out of it if you don't. Audrey, *be firm*."

But Audrey looked at her brother, and saw her brother weakly consulting the eyes that were so eloquent in their grey velvet depths; and Audrey turned and left the room in a passion of womanly disappointment and sisterly jealousy.

"You must consent to wait, Fred, till my sister can go from my house as *my* sister ought to go. Leonie says all can be ready by the first week in January; and in the meantime I'll put a detective on the track of the clever thief."

"For God's sake don't do that," cried Lord Evesham, starting to his feet.

"Why not?" asked Sir Robert; "extraordinary fellow you are, to be sure! Why not? Don't you think it would be better—in fact, only right, Leonie?"

Leonie, lovely Lady Lorme, doubly lovely in her graceful part of the peacemaker, rose also from her seat with rather less than usual of her languid

ease; how brightly, too, the wild-rose bloomed in her fair cheeks as she crossed the room and clasped her pretty white hands over her future brother-in-law's arm.

"You must not get angry with each other, Robert; and you," she said, plaintively, "if you think it better to let the matter drop, I will not raise my voice to urge Robert to carry it on. *You* shall decide, Lord Evesham."

Lord Evesham's arm trembled like a leaf in the clasp of his friend's wife. He kept his face averted from her, crossly, Sir Robert Lorme thought; and when he did speak, it was with an effort.

"I have been bothered and worried quite enough," he said; "I shall take it unkindly, Robert, if you moot the affair again; let it drop."

"Let it drop!" echoed my lady. "Robert, dear," she continued, quitting Lord Evesham's side, and lightly laying her hand on her husband's arm, "now that I see he really wishes it, I join my request to his; take no further notice of it—promise me."

"Well, on my word," exclaimed Sir Robert, pettishly, "you two people take the greenest view of things; first, Evesham's frantic with rage and all that sort of thing against an insolent, bold scoundrel who could be traced out and hunted down in no time if only proper steps were taken. It is dead against my principles to shield a thief—a dirty, low, unscrupulous thief and forger, as this fellow must be."

Lady Lorme laughed; her little, trifling, bell-like laugh ran round the room, and then she put both her slender white hands up to her hair and pushed it back with a free, almost a childish action of impatience. Her face looked so freshly fair as she did it—so young, and unsullied, and pure.

"Robert," she said, growing grave again suddenly, "what a regular John Bull you are to be so dense, and to force your poor little wife to explain things a little, if she would not see a quarrel. I may be wrong, but I fancy Evesham would not care to have things traced perhaps, because——"

She paused, and flung a half-frightened, half-defiant glance at Lord Evesham, who sedulously kept his eyes turned away from her.

"Because what?" asked her husband, angrily.

"Because—now be quiet, and good, and calm, Robert, and above all things avoid a scene and a disturbance which will do nothing but aggravate Audrey—because, good boy as Evesham is now, he may have loved and ridden away, and left some fair, unscrupulous damsel in the lurch, who has dared to pay herself for his defection by appropriating his bride's dresses. *That* is my solution of the affair."

"By my soul this is too much!" And so it seemed, for Lord Evesham's voice was thick with passion. "Let me pass, my lady. Lorme, it was not for my own sake that I urged tolerance; hunt the forger down to the death—I will not be the man to stay your hand."

"How theatrical he is!" exclaimed Lady Lorme, as the enraged lover and insulted lord left the room. "You see, Robert, I was right; it was very imprudent of me to say it before him of course, but I wonder you were stupid enough not to read the truth in his unwillingness. You *must* now, for Audrey's sake, let the matter rest. He *has* been very gay, you know, and a worthless woman will stop at nothing."

"True, true," said Sir Robert, rather absently. "I could have wished, though, you had not enraged

him so. At any rate say nothing to poor Audrey about it, for they are uncommonly attached to each other."

"Oh, uncommonly!" replied Lady Lorme; "don't be distressed about Lord Evesham's indignation with me—I think I can make it up with him. Are you going out?"

Sir Robert was not sure; he was uncomfortable about Evesham; he did not like any ill-feeling of that kind rankling in a fellow's mind; it *was* annoying for a fellow to have a thing of that sort dragged into notice before the brother of the girl he was going to marry, just when he was going to marry her.

Lady Lorme had another plan, however, than Sir Robert's going to seek Lord Evesham.

"You go out for a ride or something, Robert, as you had intended, and leave me to deal with the 'wounded proper feeling' of this reformed Don Juan. You must seem to have forgotten it when you come in, and you will find him soothed. But do have sufficient regard for him to drop all idea of making a stir in an affair that when sifted might not redound to his credit. Will you?"

When could my lady's solicitations fail of having their due effect on her husband? Certainly not now, when she brought all her beauty, and grace, and charm of manner, and exquisite devotion—wifely this last, but very delightful—to bear upon him. Sir Robert sealed his promise with a kiss, and forgot his annoyance at Audrey's disappointment and its cause, in admiration for the eyes whose grey unclouded depths were turned towards him, courting perusal, or sounding rather.

"Then as I am not permitted to bear him the olive-branch myself, as you (my darling) resolve upon being mediatrix-in-chief between us, I will do the next best thing under the circumstances—go out for an hour on the Leprechaun and quiet him."

Sir Robert Lorme was holding both the little white slender-fingered hands of his wife, holding them in his own strong loving clasp, and bending down over them with the sort of uncontrolled admiration men sometimes display towards the wives of their bosoms—an admiration that comes of mingled pride of possession and loss of reasoning powers—and as he stood thus with his eyes riveted on her fair face, he was in a position to see that the wild-rose tint resigned suddenly in favour of a deadly pallor.

Those who have seen a sort of pale yellow quiver gradually creep over and cover a blushing face beloved by them, the gazers will alone understand the sort of revulsion of feeling that came over Sir Robert Lorme when the face before him altered, and so to speak, from the *couleur de rose* of love to the greenish blue of fear.

"What is the matter, Leonie?" he asked, suddenly. "My darling wife! these scenes are too trying—too much altogether for you. What a brute I am," he continued, tenderly winding his arm round the fragile round waist as he spoke with aught but "brutish" instinct, "to subject *you* to all these—to all the——in short, to allow anything unforeseen to be brought under your notice annoyingly. Evesham ought to have known better—Audrey might have had some little feeling—the fact is, the deuce is in it if *my wife* is to be upset with impunity."

He was just in the frame of mind in which a man

can be most successfully "worked." His love for her was alarmed ; so was his pride for himself. That *she*, Leonie, should have been perplexed, harassed, and overwrought was abominable ; that all these sensations should have been caused to His Wife—to Lady Lorme—was disgusting in the extreme. He was evidently angry with Audrey for not putting by any small feeling of disappointment that she might have experienced when her *trousseau* made to itself wings and flitted away with her prospect of matrimony for a fortnight. He was angry in a sort of undefined way with Lord Evesham for not falling in with all his views respecting the steps to be taken in the affair immediately. And he was more angry still with both Audrey and Lord Evesham for being the cause remotely (and for not expressing more sympathy with the efforts) of his wife having an unbecoming yellow-hued tremor pass over her frame and face.

Lady Lorme, with a woman's quick comprehension of the state of mind of the man—no matter how astute—who loves her, read in a moment the thoughts and feelings that were making the tour of her husband's brain, as he stood and looked at her, and raged against his sister and his friend. Now, while the iron of anger was hot to white heat, was the moment to strike ; Lady Lorme saw that it was the moment, and—struck remorselessly.

"I—I am very *foolish*, I fear you will think, in my engrossing affection for you, Robert ; ascribe it to everything but selfishness and affectation, dearest ; and forgive me when I say that I tremble for Audrey's—for *your* sister's happiness, if this marriage is urged on by you in any way just at present."

She dropped her words, her cutting words, to a man

who had brotherly and family pride raging in his soul, out slowly, sweetly, softly. They fell, rounded and distinct, like polished pebbles on his ears, and they caused a smarting, bruised sensation to ensue on falling.

"Good heavens, Leonie! folly, selfishness, and affectation would die from off the earth speedily enough if they were compelled to try for quarters in your bosom; *I* know that well enough; *I* shall never accuse you of anything of the sort. But you are too tender for me; for my honour—the pride, and honour, and name of the man you've blessed with your love. There is no hauling back, no wishing to get out of it, no lukewarmness on Evesham's part, believe me; had there been, Audrey would have seen and resented it, and Audrey's brother would *have known the reason why.*"

"A woman's pride weighs lightly in the scale against a woman's love, Robert," she said, with the piquant accent softened into a most mournful cadence. "*Audrey loves him*—in that you have the solution of much forbearance; you are the soul of honour yourself, and so, naturally enough, are not on the look-out for baseness and cowardly trickery; while *I* bring all the wit of my sex to bear on the subject, sharpened up to the point of divination by my consuming love for—*you.* The marriage of Lord Evesham with your sister, unless you force it on immediately, will *never take place.*"

She rang out her ill-omened sentence with the thrilling force of a prophetess; he could not doubt her loving acumen when the lovely face he adored grew white with emotion, and the eyes dilated and the lips trembled with anger for the slight she supposed was to be put upon *him.* He could not doubt her when

she sank back on a couch gracefully, breathing hard, but with her *toilette* entirely uninfluenced by her emotions, looking like a fashionably costumed fairy queen remarkably well got up. He could not doubt the woman whom he had married a month ago for love, and whose every look, and tone, and gesture betrayed soul-fraught devotion to himself. In fact, he could not doubt the creature his imagination had conceived dwelt beneath that peerlessly lovely form ; so he really was wrought upon by her statement, and still felt it to be a profoundly unpleasant thing to distrust Evesham, and to take the preliminary steps towards making the pet sister whom he had always cherished from boyhood miserable ; he did what a man is pretty sure to do under such or similar circumstances, stood still and pulled at the ends of his moustache.

"I think you are wrong, Leonie, 'pon my word I do ; it's no honour even for Evesham to marry a Lorme, you know ; and even if you are right, what *am* I to do—what *can* I do, now things have gone so far ? It is quite a different thing seeking any fellow's alliance, and proclaiming to the world the fact that your sister is jilted—that you're thrown over, in fact."

"Patience, patience is the only thing, Robert ; don't urge on the marriage by making those suggestions about her getting her *trousseau* in Paris ; he can but agree when you suggest, you know. Leave it to time the great prover, and chance the great providence of us poor mortals. In the meantime I promise you that all *I* can do I will do to bring things to that end I would see them brought to."

And having made this gratifying promise to her lord, Lady Lorme dismissed him to the hour's "gent-

ling" of the Leprechaun that he had contemplated, and then betook herself to the dark, cosy old library, where, as she had anticipated, she found Lord Evesham.

All that passed during the interview shall not be chronicled here ; suffice it to say that the last words uttered by Lord Evesham, when my lady was leaving him to array herself in fresh millinery triumphs for dinner, were—

"The old legends about selling one's soul seem to be verified in my case ; for the sake of us all—for your own sake—for the sake of a poor wretch who feels even now the horrors of the perdition you are hurrying him into—stop."

"On the road I am taking?" she asked, with a brilliant smile flashing over her face like lightning. "Never, for you love me, Lord Evesham."

CHAPTER VII.

IN WHICH SIR ROBERT LOOKS SOLEMN, AND THE
ANCESTRAL EVESHAMS SAD.

AUDREY LORME would have laughed, and considered it no more than a semi-annoying, semi-amusing *contretemps* a month ago, had her *trousseau* been appropriated by another, and her countess-ship delayed awhile. She would have been vexed in her taste, because she herself had made her selections of robes, and bonnets, and *bijouterie* with the care and thought a pretty woman will lavish on the adornments which are destined to enhance her beauty in the richest bloom of life—her young married days. But her *heart* would not have been affected by the occurrence at all, and she would have been the first to soothe Evesham's impatience and side with Robert's view of things, that it would be unbecoming for his sister to leave Sir Robert Lorme's house while aught that could be considered proper for *his* sister to leave remained unsupplied.

But now the case was different. Clearly there was something unpropitious in the air; she could not account to herself for the fierce pang that shot through her heart when she caught the interrogatory glance levelled by her brother at his wife, and read the answer shot back by the gloriously lovely and only too eloquent grey eyes.

She saw that that answer counselled delay. Had she simply felt indignation at such interference she

would have been happier ; but she could not take comfort to her heart with the thought that it was only indignation which she felt ; it was a sudden, hot pang of sickening fear that the deferred marriage was a blow at the chain which bound the man she loved and herself together. She looked at her brother, and saw a weak expression of waiting on his wife's award ; she looked at her lover, and saw in his face an expression of profound discomfort and a pallid excitement ; and then she remembered that though had the wretched trifle which conventionality was making a thing of magnitude not occurred, she would have been in a week bone of his bone, flesh of his flesh, one with him in sickness and health, in sorrow and joy, till death parted them ; she remembered, I say, that now it was his to speak, and hers—to be silent ; even though a word from her might settle all these wavering scruples, and bid the happy end come on speedily. And remembering this—her love and her pride up in arms against each other—sorely distrustful of “something,” she knew not what, Audrey Lorme left the room in a sorrowful rage.

When one has been labouring for a couple of hours under the delusion that the organ, yecept a heart, has sunk to the lowest ebb of despair, it is astonishing what a shock it administers to the whole system when something unexpected occurs, and the heart goes down with rapidity to even more hopeless depths.

Audrey, during her hour's cogitation over her dressing-room fire, had declared to herself that she was profoundly miserable, under the influence of some intangible possible evil which she dreaded, she did not know why. That hour over, she roused herself sufficiently to dress, and to submit to a daintily becoming

organization of her fair luxuriant hair being achieved, still at intervals repeating to herself the declaration, that it was "so unpleasant that she almost wished she was not going to see Evesham until she felt in better spirits and better temper." Nevertheless, when she went down into the drawing-room and found her brother and his wife there alone, and heard from the latter, in a tone of much sympathy, that "Lord Evesham had not felt very well, so he had gone home and left a little note for Audrey," the latter felt even more than heretofore that grief was gathering in the clouds, and that she would be drenched in the waters completely before—what?

The note was commonplace and matter-of-fact enough. Audrey reading it in the light of her indignation at his abrupt departure, could little guess what an effort it had cost him to pen those words. His soul was tossed in a whirlwind of passion as he wrote; a love that he felt to be guilty, and to be liable to lead on to even greater guilt if not checked—thrown out with scorn for ever—was crushing his heart. A terrible fear of a something terrible that might, that surely would come on, seized him even before Lady Lorme had left him, and it reigned triumphantly when he was alone. He could not sit through an evening with the silent reproach of Audrey's pure noble beauty, and Audrey's loyal, frank, open heart before him, and beating in imaginary response to his own (he loathed himself as he acknowledged it) *false* one. He invoked a curse on the syren, whom still, with all the fierce ungovernable heat of his hot heart, he was growing to love again. And this was the frame of mind in which he had to write the few following lines, all properly kind and calm, to Audrey:—

"DEAR AUDREY,

"Why have you kept away all the afternoon, leaving me to battle alone against my old enemy, neuralgia, which has reached maddening point in my head? I am useless, socially, when an attack comes on; so I am off to Evesham, hoping that the sharp ride will do me good; it often does in such cases. Of course I shall see you in a day or two;" and then, with the customary termination, he signed himself, "hers always, Evesham."

And the lie as he wrote it did not wither him up.

The pleasures of domesticity are very great, and a quiet winter evening at home with one's "natural friends," *i. e.*, relations, is the truest bliss this world can offer, say the story-books of that good old fading-out class in which all the mild goodnesses of life were carefully but prosily inculcated. Many people have found out that the pleasures have been rather over-rated, and the bliss overstated; but no one deemed them greater fallacies than did Lady and Miss Lorme on the evening in question.

Sir Robert was not quite happy either. Leonie's loveliness was something superb, but the flush on Leonie's cheek bespoke a mind ill at rest, and Sir Robert thought that Audrey might have noticed it, and attempted to subdue it by showing herself less enrapt and displeased about something. Considering how carefully Leonie was keeping her suspicions as to the "cause" of the appropriation of Audrey's "effects" to herself, thus striving to save Audrey a foolish little feminine pang of jealousy at a thing *no* woman can ever be brought to understand; considering Leonie was doing all these magnanimous things, even though

Audrey didn't know it, Audrey ought to be good, and grateful, and cheerful, and not try to make their paradise boring and tedious to my lady. Sir Robert did not say all this, but he looked it ; and Audrey being far from opaque, understood perfectly well what was going on in his mind, and forthwith had this pang superadded to the other, viz., that her brother, whom she most dearly loved, was learning to be indifferent to *her* hopes and fears, pleasures and disappointments.

My lady was hot and restless, and her heart, though not full of care, was full of wild schemes and wilder passions ; the burden laid upon her of not being as great and as grand as she might have been, had she only been gifted with patience, was greater than she could bear. Besides, now that she was bound legally, and Evesham bound honourably, to another, she felt that the strongest love of which her nature was capable—and it was capable of not a trifle—was given to this man, to whom, in the order of things, her husband's sister would be shortly married. No wonder her cheeks were flushed and her eyes bright, and her gestures fraught with a more impassioned panther-like grace than ever.

Is it well that we do not know the thoughts of those who are around us always? or should we gain much safety through the loss of a little peace of mind? Surely the former ; the pang the knowledge that we had the hearty contempt of the friend we loved would cause, would more than counterbalance the knowledge that by taking an arduous course we might escape being socially garotted by the friend we hate. The Palace of Truth would be a hideous dwelling-place for the majority of mankind.

So on the whole I am inclined to think it well

that when Sir Robert stood with his hands resting on the velvet-covered shoulders of his most lovely wife, the while she was playing him the melodies he loved, he did not know that the active brain contained in the bright head before him was planning how she could leave him, win a higher rank, and yet save her fair fame for the sake of the place she wanted in the world. "I wish he'd clasp me to his heart!" the little fury thought as she turned from him with impatience, "and bruise my arm in doing it; I would have him up at the Divorce Court for cruelty, and swear my way to freedom and Evesham." At least if these were not the identical words in which her sentiments were framed, these were the very ideas that passed through her mind as she rose up and—no, she *had* few redeeming points, if any—not freed herself from, but responded to, her husband's embrace.

Who does not know—who has not experienced at some period or another of his or her existence, an aching sense of despondency at being undervalued, and unquestionably not wanted in the society which one may be chancing to adorn at the time? Sometimes this feeling is born of an overweening sense of one's own importance; sometimes of a long series of slights and insults that makes one see a foe behind every bush, and a steel blade ready to fall and cut in every look. In both of these two cases the feeling is more blameable than deserving of sympathy; it should be fought and battled against—conquered, if possible; but it is when the feeling rushes upon us in connexion with those who have hitherto loved, and valued, and cherished us, that the sting once felt cannot be uprooted; then no struggling against, no explaining away will avail, for we feel that distrust of them could

not have arisen had they loved us as fondly as heretofore.

By which prosing route I come gradually round to the statement of the following plain unvarnished fact. Audrey learnt with a bitter pang that night that she was less dear to her brother than she had been—learnt that he could be harsh and unsympathetic in his judgment of her when he viewed her through the glamour his wife had thrown over him.

The evening passed drearily after the pretence of tea had been gone through. Wool-work is a delightful institution, but it requires two or three animated conversationalists round the frame, or one devoted and absorbing holder of skeins to prevent its palling upon one. As Audrey placed stitch after stitch in the crimson rose which she had begun under Evesham's auspices a few evenings before, she felt that wool-work brought no great comfort to a heart ill at ease. Lady Lorme treated her with a sort of pitying good-nature, and Sir Robert with a sort of angry forbearance; and neither of these modes of treatment agreed with Audrey Lorme.

"This is the last evening I spend in this way," she thought. "Robert's intention of sacrificing not alone his own dignity, but mine, at the feet of the wife who rules him with a magic that is not love, becomes more painfully apparent every hour that we live together. Robert!" she exclaimed aloud, "Christmas is coming on fast; there will be no wedding festivities to stand in the way of the usual gaieties of the season; can't you, with Lady Lorme's leave, arrange something to while away the time pleasantly?"

Sir Robert Lorme was a good, noble-hearted man; sensible, and well educated, and a gentleman; but for

all that he was one of those distressing people who take their ill-temper solemnly. Now it is very possible to forgive any one for frightening you out of your life with a burst of passionate anger without reason, but it is barely possible to forgive the one who maintains a solemnly reprehending demeanour to you for a lengthened period, whether you have done anything to deserve it or not. Sir Robert Lorme had not the great art of being affable soon after being angry. He deemed Audrey "unreasonable," that was the way he framed it in his mind, though what poor Audrey had done to deserve such a sentence it would be hard to say. And deeming Audrey unreasonable, he thought it would be only right to let Audrey know that "them was his sentiments." So he did it as unpleasantly as a man and a brother could do it, and that was neither slightly nor lightly.

He was sorry, he said stiffly, that she found it so dull with only himself and Leonie. She would soon doubtless be in a position of so much higher rank and greater wealth (Lady Lorme's eyes flashed fire, and Lady Lorme's pouting, dewy mouth wreathed itself into a bitterly insulting smile as he said it) than they were, that a distaste for the quiet pleasures with which they were contented would be only befitting her exaltation. But in the meantime he thought it would be only kind of her *not* to show such utter weariness and *ennui* in the home that had been hers—he had hoped *happily*—for so many years. He wound up by saying that it would have shown better taste and better temper if Audrey had not been so palpably put out by the postponement of her marriage.

"That speech was never dictated by your own heart, Robert," his sister cried, haughtily pushing the work-

frame from her with a quick, proud gesture of scornful impatience ; "it is meanly unkind, and, more than that, it is meanly untrue."

"Do you think that I prompted him, Audrey ? Oh ! how can you be so unjust ? But no—I will not resent what you say now. I pity you too much."

"What for ?" asked Audrey ; "really, Lady Lorme, one requires the patience of Job, or a donkey, to deal with Robert and you to-night. I know of nothing connected with myself individually that can claim your pity. Is it the loss of the *trousseau* that you sympathize with ? or is it Lord Evesham's neuralgia ? or were you so nervous when your own matrimonial prospects were on the *tapis* that you think, of necessity, delay means defection ?"

"No, I had no fear, for Robert loved me ; but by your asking me that question, poor unhappy girl, you evidently fear it yourself. *Don't* doubt him yet, Audrey dearest ; you hate *me*—I know that ; but let me plead for your happiness against yourself. Wait ; don't distrust him yet, Audrey, and 'all may be well."

She said it all in her sweetest tones ; there was nothing in lip, or eye, or manner, or tone that could be found fault with ; it sounded like an outburst of nervous affection and anxiety for Audrey ; and yet if the woman had been practising for ten years instead of ten minutes she could not have put words together more deftly that would surely go well home to the heart and wound. To be told by one you hate not to "doubt and distrust" one you most dearly love, is the very refinement of feminine cruelty. The gauntlet was thrown down now, and Lady Lorme and Audrey knew that they were enemies—to the death.

"Have I gone too far?" thought my lady, as she sat by the fire, one hand clasped in her husband's and the other shielding her cheek from the blaze. "Have I put her on her guard, or only incensed her? If she comes to an explanation with *him* before my plans are matured, I am ruined as far as obtaining freedom (and a place) is concerned."

And while these two women, the one lofty souled, good, trustful, and pure—the other madly ambitious, passionate, and recklessly unscrupulous, were both aching at heart for him, what was the "young lord lover" doing to pass away the hours of that long December night?

He had ridden Cock Robin home at a terrible pace, but black care was faster, and was at Evesham ready to receive him when he entered. Then—it may seem an undignified thing to mention in connexion with a man who is meant to be a hero, but these minor things are very important in the great drama of life—then his dinner was hurriedly prepared (it had been supposed that he would dine at Combhurst, and the cook was disgusted at the interruption his return caused to a convivial party she was entertaining) and badly cooked. The room he elected to take his wine in was cold, for the fire had been suffered to go out, and now when it was lighted hastily it burnt under protest. The *Cornhill* was given to him, smelling of *patchouli* from the handkerchief of the housemaid, who had been reading the "Roundabout Papers" and wondering what such rubbidge meant, when the serial was demanded from her aggrieved hands in haste for her impatient master by a sympathetic flunkey, who opined in strong language that it was a wrong thing of anyone to come home and make a bother when it

was reasonably anticipated that he would stay away and leave folks to enjoy themselves. All these things militated considerably against Lord Evesham passing even a comfortable evening as far as externals were concerned.

The room in which he was sitting, before the fire that wouldn't burn well, was the library. Every library has its speciality; and from it generally better than any other room in a house may you gain an insight into its owner's mind. Some rush recklessly into rich bindings and huge, gorgeously emblazoned tomes. Some go in for ponderosity, others again for prettiness, while the majority stick to what is legitimate, and get properly supplied with the right kind of books wholesale. The speciality of the Evesham library was not in its books, strangely enough, but in its pictures. The bookshelves merely ran a few feet up the walls, and the space between the tops of them and the ceiling was filled entirely with fine but sombre and fly-blown ancestors of the dark, gloomy man who sat by the fire and glanced round on them occasionally, with a look half scornful, half mournful.

There were refined Vandyke beauties and cavaliers; there were voluptuous dames, whose charms had been immortalized by Lely, and bird-and-dove carrying shepherdesses of a later date. They were all handsome, those Eveshams, men and women too, but the thing about them which attracted most—which struck their descendant painfully to-night—was the deep shade of melancholy which lived in the steady dark eyes and on the broad resolute brows of all.

"They all—all came to bad or sad ends," he muttered; "we are doomed, we Eveshams, to be wicked or unhappy."

CHAPTER VIII.

THE PARSIMONIOUS EARL.

PERHAPS the next worst thing to a beggarly nobleman is a parsimonious one ; I should be inclined myself to give precedence in badness to the mean man, but I know the way of the world is to regard the moneyless one as the greater sinner, therefore I will only claim for the Earl of Corbyn second-rate honours in the contempt of my readers.

Mention has been already made of his wife in these pages ; she was the lady who tried her noble hand at "putting down" Lady Lorme, when that estimable woman first came into the neighbourhood. She was the lady whose failure in that womanly attempt was duly chronicled.

When she, the second daughter of the Duke of Oldmaynham, married the Earl of Corbyn, she knew that though from a financial point of view she was not doing a very brilliant thing, still it was the best thing she could do. Her father had nothing but his blessing to give his children, and that, taking into consideration what a character he had borne from the time he could speak plain, was scarcely worth having. However, as it was all he had to give, his daughters took it when they married, and between them made up an income for him, and pensioned him off at a London hotel while he lived ; his son declined the honour of contributing

to the filial purse ; he regarded his father with the warm feelings sons of expensive habits are apt to have towards the fathers who have ruined them. Lady Corbyn's early married career was one struggle between the promise she had made to her sisters, and the difficulty she experienced in getting possession of a pound. The earl's income was not colossal—his care of it was ; the result was a style of living that was imposing when seen from a distance, but very uncomfortable to those within its circle.

The blood of the Corbyns was as blue as it is possible to conceive anything short of indigo could be ; and the Oldmaynhams were blessed with a fluid circling in their veins of an equally orthodox hue. Nevertheless the daughters of the house of Corbyn, Lady Julia, Lady Grace, and Lady Margaret, showed more bone than blood, and were consequently spoken of even by the warmest admirers of their rank as "fine girls, but not pretty."

This last fact not even their father being an earl and their grandfather a duke could alter. They were tall, they had mealy faces, rather fine blue eyes, and more than rather sandy hair ; their figures were not good, and they were not graceful ; but for all that they were not cast in the mould of beauty, they were plentifully gifted with feelings of profound admiration for themselves, and of the loftiest matrimonial aspirations.

The youngest—Lady Margaret—had been destined by her fond parents from her cradle to be Lady Evesham ; she had accepted the fate they proposed to her with a readiness that spoke as well for her taste as it did for her dutifulness, for Evesham was unexceptionable. Those little peccadillos of his which got

noised abroad she paid no manner of attention to—not because, like Audrey Lorme, she loved him, but, on the contrary, because she didn't love him, and hoped that the more “scrapes,” as she called it, that he got into, the less likely he would be to marry anyone else before he came in the way of her net. It had been a hard and a horrible thing to endure, when at the grand ball they (the Corbys) gave in his honour on his return from the continent after coming to the title, to see him palpably fall at once a willing victim to Audrey Lorme. It had been wofully painful to endure that interval of surmising and uncertainty before the match was proclaimed as a thing that really *was* to come off. But when the match was settled, with the beautiful bravery that comes of “blood,” they made the best of it, pressed the thorn of envy closely home in secret to their right honourable bosom, kissed Audrey in the course of a morning call of congratulation, and determined that as Margaret was *not* to reign at Evesham, it would be only wise to make an ally instead of a foe of the lady who *was*.

I have hinted that the earl was parsimonious ; the countess, I may as well state here, was worse—she was a pretentious screw. She had given her daughters cheap French, Italian, and German governesses, and these had not imparted the best of either accents, morals, or manners to their aristocratic charges—but with that my story has nothing to do. She would give them splendid silks—thousands of yards of ethereal *tulle* to hang about their gaunt persons—and the most elegant and becoming bonnets that Madame Thoumal's taste and ingenuity could devise *when they were going out* ; but she grudged them flannel enough to keep them warm, and was severe upon their appetites down

at Corbyn; and that tradesman was unlucky who chanced to have a "remnant" on his counter when the countess sailed into his shop, for she was sure to have it for next to nothing.

That matter of the postponed marriage was soon carried to them by that wonderful little bird who is perpetually going about with its venomous whisper. They talked it over, the mother and her three daughters, in the dressing-room of the former, before they went down to their early luncheon, which was the first meal at which they found it convenient to make their appearance, for "any old *robe de chambre* did for upstairs and saved dressing till it was time to go out." So now in their dingily draped, crinolineless, unadorned ugliness they sat and discussed the affair, and naturally enough—for were they not of the softer sex?—accused Audrey in ten minutes of every crime and folly in the calendar of feminine crimes and follies.

The extraordinary thing about a broken engagement is, that no matter what the circumstances, the woman always gets blamed as well as pitied. Those of her own sex heave huge sighs of compassion over her blighted prospects, but at the same time they contrive to depreciate her claims to that compassion by elevating their eyebrows and screwing up their lips.

The Ladies Corbyn had not come to their matutinal meal in good spirits or good tempers, any more than they had in dresses. They dropped in one after the other, with their sandy hair pushed away unbecomingly under nets, their cheeks leaden-hued from over-sleep, and eyes dull from lack of excitement. The tea "was overdrawn," Lady Julia declared pettishly as she poured out a cup and prepared to drink it; the remark roused the countess from the perusal of a letter she had just

received, and her speech when she was aroused infused new life into the whole party.

"Put the eggs in," she exclaimed, "they'll be boiled by the time we've had prayers" (she was a very pious woman, and never omitted heating up prayers and thanksgivings every morning). "I have such news, girls! there's a scandal of some sort come out at Combhurst, and Lord Evesham has started off to the Continent."

"I always thought Audrey Lorme a detestable girl," said Lady Margaret, energetically. "I am glad, though, whatever it is, that it has come out before poor Evesham was indissolubly tied up with her."

"It may not be Audrey, after all," said Lady Julia, who had not quite such good grounds for hating Audrey as her sisters had: "most probably something has been discovered about that horrid woman Sir Robert picked up in London. I always thought she was a mere adventuress—I always said so. Too bad of him to thrust her upon society in the way he has done, contaminating other people."

Lady Julia had at one time thought of marrying the baronet herself; therefore her virtuous indignation against the possible past of his wife was a genuine thing.

"Do let us have prayers; the eggs will be too hard," said Lady Grace.

"What a bore it is that Buckle always will carry my soft hassock away to her own room," remarked the countess, picking up the volume of "Family Devotions" in a casual kind of way. "Suppose I sit in the easy-chair, and read them. I can't kneel down—it makes me sick."

"Suppose we have breakfast first," said Lady Grace

"You have not given me the food for my mind that you have Julia and Margaret ; you see, I never wanted to marry either Evesham or Lorme."

"And I never heard that either of them wanted to marry you, my dear," snapped Lady Margaret.

"Precisely the remark that I was about to append to my former sentence respecting yourself, my love," replied Lady Grace. "Let us give Audrey Lorme the benefit of a doubt, and hope that it's not so bad as mamma's letter has led her to imagine ; you know how these things always get exaggerated."

"My correspondent is reliable," said the countess, buttering some cold toast ; "but I tell you what we will do—send out invitations for a dinner-party to-day, and call on the Lormes to-morrow ; we owe them both a dinner and a call, and we may get at the truth that way a little."

"That nasty little wretch, his wife, is capable of braving anything out, if it's about herself," said Lady Julia. "Who had better go with you, mamma, to-morrow?"

"Margaret and yourself, I think. Tiresome it is that the Gospel Propagation subscription is due, for we *must* have new lace and buttons on the liveries before a dinner. I think I shall write and say that I disapprove of the principles on which it is conducted ; your father, as a politician, considers christianizing the heathen a mistake. I am very sorry for it, of course ; but as a wife, my first duty is to consult my husband's scruples."

"Well, you needn't waste your reasons for doing what is convenient on us, mamma. No more tea, thank you, Julia. I sha'n't wait for prayers now ; for if the invitations are to go out to-day, they ought to

be filled up and sent. I will give O'Brien the list, mamma ; I suppose the usual people are to be asked ?”

Lady Grace rose as she asked her question, and put, with something like feminine coquetry, her net on more becomingly.

“ Yes, the usual people,” said the countess ; and then she added, in a crosser tone, “ Your father insists that his secretary, librarian, whatever he may be, is always to be invited properly, and treated like a guest at our formal dinner-parties. For my own part, I don't see *why* he should be ; he chooses to sit by himself and nurse his fallen grandeur in his own study at other times, when we really would be glad of him to amuse us ; but your father is so full of whims about the wretched Irishman, that you must invite him, Grace.”

“ I don't fancy myself that Grace will object to that part of the mission at all,” said her eldest sister, as Lady Grace left the room. “ It's a fortunate thing for *us* that Grace is no beauty, otherwise I am very much mistaken if we should not have to bewail a *mésalliance*.”

“ Oh, nonsense !” said the countess. “ No one with the blood of the Oldmaynhams in their veins would think for a moment of marrying a *servant*.”

And then they finished their eggs, and being now quite warm and comfortable, said their prayers with much unction.

The late Earl of Corbyn had been a great bibliomaniac ; with much care and at much expense he had collected together, from every quarter of the globe, books and manuscripts, pamphlets and parchments. Not being anything of a philologist, he had been rather imposed upon in many of his transactions ; and as his

son and heir was possessed of even less learning and greater vanity than himself, the state of the Corbyn library (to which was usually prefixed the epithet of "great") was chaos.

That it was so had been pointed out to him during the shooting season of the year of my story, by a devoted but indiscreet friend; and it was to remedy all its defects, and get it in the order which it behoved the great Corbyn library to be in, that the services of Dillon O'Brien, Esq., had been secured.

Now, all kinds of persons may be expected to answer when a "nobleman of literary tastes" advertises for "a librarian and amanuensis." Broken-spirited, conscientious English scholars, with care on their brows and holes in their gloves, are sure to appear; so are mournful-eyed Italians, who call themselves counts, and have been couriers—German barons of noble lineage, wearing a professional aspect and large boots, assist to swell the list—Frenchmen, who skip and gesticulate, and wind up with a shoulder-shrugging confession of their ignorance of all matters in heaven and earth, and under the latter, offer their animated services. But it is rarely indeed that a son of Erin can be found ready to enter into the ranks of drudgery of the great army of learnedom.

Lord Corbyn knew little enough, Heaven knows; but he did happen to have that much knowledge of the law of chances—viz., that if the handsome, refined young Irishman who presented himself with a card, and without a single letter of introduction, was *worth anything*, he would be worth much as librarian and literary slave to himself.

The interview was satisfactory so far to both parties, that Lord Corbyn agreed to take, and Mr

O'Brien to give, his services. "What they were worth," O'Brien said, "could be better determined at the end of the year." It was a very loose and unpractical kind of arrangement, but Lord Corbyn was just gentleman enough to resolve upon one thing—that *noblesse oblige* should not be the cause of the proud, chivalrous young Irishman losing anything.

It is one of the cries of this practical age that *noblesse oblige* "does not pay." I hope it is not true; I hope that it is fashionable cynicism alone which utters and endorses such sentiments. I lack faith in many an old tradition; I have learnt to laugh and deride at things which I once held to be true and great; but I have not learnt, and I trust I never shall learn, to doubt the gentle feeling that springs from gentle blood. At any rate, even if I doubted it, Dillon O'Brien did *not*; he resolved to trust for his treatment to Lord Corbyn's *honour*, and Lord Corbyn knew this, and resolved that his honour should not fail him.

On the morning when the countess and her daughters discussed the broken troth—as they hoped it might prove—between Lord Evesham and Audrey, Mr. O'Brien, my lord's secretary, sat alone in his study, smoking (I am sorry to say it) a pipe of Turkish tobacco.

Had he been standing instead of sitting, you would have seen, if you had entered that room, reader, that the sword had had more to do with his early days than learned tome or pictured page. He was a soldier every inch of him; a tall, firm, upright figure, a graceful, lithe gait and bearing; a face that was not strictly handsome when taken line by line, but that had a marvellous charm in its mobility. Eyes that would

flash one moment with ungovernable temper, glitter the next with the wildest fun, and soften the next with an indescribable pathos that is never seen save in Irish eyes; bright, curling, dark-brown hair; a complexion southern in its dark warm pallor, and the finest cut mouth out of which the matchless accents of Erin have ever fallen. A handsome man altogether you will admit it, and felt to be so by the Lady Grace Corbyn.

"I am tired of this life," said the gentleman, starting up and going to the window; "old Corbyn's books are dry and dusty, and his daughters are worse. After all, though I *have* been kicked out of the service for no fault of my own, it is a mean thing of me to come here and pretend to catalogue these books with anything like understanding." Then he paused and whistled the first few bars of a pathetically sweet melody, his eyes the while taking that steadfastly absent look eyes will have when their owners are looking back into the past; and then he softly sang, in a rarely sweet, full, luscious voice,—

"Give a sigh to those times,
And a blessing for me to that alley of limes."

"'Give a sigh to those times,'" he repeated, bitterly. "Why should she give a sigh for the time when that bleak, cold, Chesterfield walk on dull Blackheath was as fraught with golden fancies, as full of love's young dreams to *us*—*she*, the frank, unsullied schoolgirl—I, the not less frank cadet, as ever that 'alley of limes' was to Moore in Bermuda. That's all past and buried, and I was a fool to come into the neighbourhood for the sake of trying to resuscitate it. I can't even catch sight of her."

It was at this moment that Lady Grace entered with the invitation list.

"Oh, Mr. O'Brien," she said, "we have a dinner-party on the 20th; will you be kind enough to help me with the invitations?"

Mr. O'Brien's answer was all that a polite Irishman's is sure to be. His thought was—

"Why couldn't she have left me the list, and rid me of her company, the sandy-haired old coquette?" but he did not express that in his mother tongue.

"You will be sure to give us your company on that evening, I hope, Mr. O'Brien; it will be very unkind and unfriendly of you if you will not."

He was just going to refuse and plead a previous engagement with an imaginary old regimental friend who would be in the neighbourhood; but before he could speak his eye caught the next names on the list, and he saw they were those of "Sir Robert, Lady, and Miss Lorme."

"Thank you, Lady Grace; since you are kind enough to wish it, I will be sure to do myself the honour," he said.

And Lady Grace's cheek flushed to a corresponding hue to the one which overspread his face as he bent down and continued his task.

CHAPTER IX.

A CHANGE FOR THE BETTER.

WHEN the Corbys called the following day at Combhurst, they were more surprised than pleased to find neither Lady nor Miss Lorme in sackcloth and ashes. Their own invitation lay upon the table in Lady Lorme's little drawing-room; and Audrey laughed and pointed it out to them, and said they were going to send "a satisfactory answer to it;" for they were all that was fair and smooth to each other, these ladies of Corbyn and Combhurst.

"And Lord Evesham," said Lady Julia, with an air of calm, confidential frankness, "we have sent him an invitation too—though mamma said it was nonsense, because she has heard that he is gone on the Continent; but, of course, under existing circumstances, we knew that such a report must be false—utterly absurd."

Now Lord Evesham had not been over to Combhurst since that day when neuralgia drove him off so suddenly; he had written to Audrey—written with most affectionate regularity—but he had not come; and Audrey was aggrieved thereat, and very properly indignant with him for his shortcomings, and with any one else for noticing them.

But now when Lady Julia Corbyn fired her little shot, indignation dropped suddenly, and something like a regretful qualm made her heart collapse. Was

this little cloud that had arisen so ignominiously going to overshadow her whole life?

She murmured in reply some commonplace words of explanation, but even as she murmured them she felt that they were failing of the impression she had hoped they might make on her guests of herself having feelings of reliance and security in all being right. And then she could hardly tell whether it was gratitude for the championship, or annoyance at the audacity, which staggered her completely, when Lady Lorme cut into the conversation with her perfectly modulated tones, and said—

“You were right to call such a report ‘false and utterly absurd;’ believe me, Lord Evesham has neither the intention nor the inclination to go on the Continent until he can take his bride with him.”

In speaking of it afterwards, Audrey said that “My lady could have given her neither kinder nor more effectual aid, but at the same time, even while she was acknowledging it and trying to feel grateful, she knew that it was offered by her deadliest foe.”

“We thought of getting up a charade for the evening,” said Lady Margaret, after a time; “would you take a part, Audrey? It is Grace’s idea, or rather, an idea that has been put into her head by a man who has just come to papa as secretary or something—a Mr. O’Brien, an Irishman.”

“I knew an O’Brien a long time ago,” said Audrey, laughing, “who, singularly enough, had a great passion for charades—indeed, for acting of all sorts. I would not mind taking a part, if a part is offered me that I can get through creditably. What word do you think of taking?”

“Oh, we should have more than one. I have de-

terminated on 'Blue Beard.' Margaret thinks that a good deal might be done with 'Parsimony.' (Audrey had a "smile in her heart," though not on her cheek, as she thought that undoubtedly at a state dinner at Corbyn a good deal *would* be done with "Parsimony.") And Mr. O'Brien—for in a case of amusement we don't mind taking him into our councils—has recommended 'Forgotten' to our notice. He says it's an excellent word."

A flush like a sun-burst passed over Audrey's face, it was such a smiling, pleased blush !

"Why," she exclaimed, with animation, "if I could think it possible that the gayest soldier I have ever met could turn secretary and book-worm, I should think it must be the same O'Brien I once knew, for I acted in that very word with Dillon O'Brien when I was a school-girl at Blackheath, and he an ensign at Woolwich."

"His name is Dillon," said Lady Julia, "actually Dillon ; *we* didn't think much of him, but papa always declared he was a gentleman, and so it seems he is by your account."

"That bit of retrospective sentimentality shall be duly reported to Evesham," thought my lady ; "he thinks her rather loftier than the angels, though he has no love for her. I wonder what he will think of stagey flirtations with Woolwich men, and blushings-up when she hears the name of one mentioned?"

"At any rate," she said aloud, "you may tell Mr. Dillon O'Brien that he is not forgotten by Miss Audrey Lorme. Perhaps—who knows? for young people will be young people (as is sapiently observed by mediocrity when it has not anything better to say in defence of folly)—he 'came here misled by a false woman's vow ;' he had

better make the best of it, and stay to drink health, not to the Baroness, but to the Countess of Evesham."

"Lady Lorme is pleased to make a joke out of nothing, you will perceive," said Audrey, rather scornfully; and then the Corbyns, having arrived at nothing, took their leave, and drove home grandly in a coronetted carriage drawn by two screwed horses.

The dinner-party at Corbyn was to come off on the 20th of the month; and as day after day passed and brought it nearer, Audrey began to realize that it would be unpleasant to meet Evesham there, unless his neuralgia, which, according to his diurnal notes to her, had rather increased than otherwise, allowed of his coming to Combhurst first. There was a wretchedly despondent tone about his letters, short as they were, which shook the girl's soul both with anger and sorrow. She felt that a man on the brink of marriage could not indulge in such a frame of mind without offering an insult to the woman whose fate was about to be linked with his.

His letters did not come by post, he sent them by a messenger, so that Audrey had no special interest in and anxiety for the arrival of the letter-bag. But on the morning of the 19th she did, contrary to her custom, intercept the bag on its way to Lady Lorme's dressing-room, and take out such epistolary communications as were in it.

There was one small, narrow missive, in a handwriting she knew well; it was addressed to "Lady Lorme," and when Lady Lorme came out of her room impatiently, watch in hand, Audrey gave her the note without a word;—without a word she took it, and for a minute or two they stood facing each other steadfastly and silently, looking into the depths of each

other's eyes, striving with all their woman's wit to fathom each other's souls. Gradually into Lady Lorme's eyes there came a mocking, laughing devil of defiance.

"Have you anything to say to me, Audrey, that you stand and stare at me so?" she asked.

"Only this," replied Audrey—"God knows *I* have no desire to pry into your—*secrets*; but do you mean to show that letter to my brother?"

"I don't know yet," said my lady; and then Audrey turned away to get somewhere by herself and *think*, leaving Lady Lorme with the Earl of Evesham's letter in her hand.

That they were living in an atmosphere of mystery, deceit, sorrow, and, she feared, sin, Audrey felt strongly. That until it was all cleared up and Fred could show her a stainless surface again, there could be no marriage between them, she immediately resolved. That her heart would be tried and sorely wrung should the separation be for ever, she frankly admitted; but the thing about which she could come to no conclusion was, would she be justified in concealing or communicating her still vague suspicions of the wife he idolized to her brother? I *must* tell him what I have seen and thought," she at last said, "out of no revenge to her for having blighted me, but out of my deep love for my brother and his honour."

The fate of one who interferes between man and wife is proverbial. When Audrey, with the tenderest delicacy, and with a repression of her own strong anger that showed the stout-hearted breed from whence she came, told her brother the incident of the note, and asked him what could a private correspondence between Lord Evesham and Lady Lorme mean, Sir

Robert elected to be high-minded and lofty, and to pity and forgive Audrey for her capricious unkindness and suspicions of his wife. Nevertheless, when Audrey left him, he rushed up rather hastily into my lady's room, and found her in tears.

"She had burnt the letter, the letter from Evesham," she said, "burnt it in a pet, for it was so, so *very* unkind. He told her plainly that he considered she wanted to make mischief between Robert and himself; that that was the reason why he had stayed away; and that he begged to know how such an unfounded dislike had arisen against a man who had never wittingly offended her. Do ride over, Robert," she continued; "tell him first that I have told you all this, and then say that I am quite sorry for having let my tongue run away with me, the other day; will you?"

"Yes," said Sir Robert, slowly, "but I am sorry you burnt the letter; I should like Audrey to have seen it."

"It is a pity," said my lady, hastily, "but now I'll make all the amends in my power: I'll ride the Leprechaun over with you, and induce him to come back."

And so she did; and a hollow peace reigned between the betrothed that evening, for Audrey was touched by his evident illness and suffering. And my lady smiled, and was gayer and lovelier than ever; and her heart beat hotly the while against the letter she had declared to be burnt. It might have been in truth if a woman's warmth of guilty love, and the passionate outpourings of her guilty lover, could have power to burn; for never wilder words of passion have been penned than those which lay over and rose

and fell on the white bosom of Lady Lorme; and they had come from the heart of Lord Evesham.

The Propagation of the Gospel subscription had been stopped, and the liveries furbished up effectively. The butler, who announced the names of Sir Robert, Lady, and Miss Lorme in magnificently sonorous accents, was brilliant as to buttons and lace. Knowing this, he came further into the room than he had been wont to do of late, and his person thus intercepted the view Mr. O'Brien would otherwise have had immediately of the advancing party.

"Bah! she wont remember me," he thought, impatiently; "why the deuce should I wait on her looks? My prospects ain't so remarkably bright that I need care to flash them before her."

But the next minute his face was illumined from within in a way that made Lady Grace feel yellow and sick; for Audrey Lorme stood before him tendering her hand, with all the old cordiality, and far more than the old grace.

"It is a long time since we used to meet at the Brahams' on Blackheath, but not long enough for us to have forgotten how to meet as friends, Mr. O'Brien."

I will not assert that the handsome Irishman had kept her image—idolized "early love" as she had been—*spotless* in his heart of hearts; I should not be believed if I did assert it; but he had kept it there brightly, and the chords of passion were swept strongly at the tones of her voice.

"A long time ago I thought it, till I saw you, Miss Lorme; *now* it seems but yesterday; but things are altered, though you are not."

"*You* are altered since those days," she said; and she thought, "for the better."

Ah, well ! we all of us have our "alley of limes," down which we wander, and, I hope, breathe a blessing on the one who used to wander through it with us occasionally. Cold is the heart that has not beaten warmly in response to some other heart in the days gone by, in the golden hours of vanished youth. Colder still the heart that does not beat more quickly when the memories of those days—perhaps the only heritage they have left us—are revived. Loving once does not with the majority mean loving always; but it speaks ill for one or the other when love dies out and no kindly feeling remains. Woe for that woman or man who can think of the "alley of limes" and invoke aught but a blessing on the head of the one who made it a thing to be remembered. The love that dies out in hate and contempt, in coolness and dislike, dies a bitter, cowardly, cruel death. Keep the kindly feeling that in the morning of life made life delicious; keep the kindly feeling ! and remember that what was all good in your eyes once cannot be all bad now, simply because time, circumstances, and distance have exerted their powers of severance. There is nothing sadder in the whole range of sorrowful experiences than hearing that one is dead whom you once loved—especially if you have grown to regard that one with but a light interest. The death might have wrung your heart with more mournful selfish grief if the love had still flowed freshly; but it would not have in that case crushed and subdued it with remorse, with the thought that it had been so lightly withdrawn. We acknowledge to the "dead" everything; but the love that is poured out freely to a memory is little worth. So in avoidance of a possible pang—which is after all but a

selfish way of putting it—keep and cherish kindly feelings towards the once-loved.

The charades went off “brilliantly”—so at least the whole company said; the assertion that they did so was made with particular force, though, by two or three of the elderly portion of the audience who had been taken in the act of going to sleep. But people invariably go to sleep if they are planted as “audience” to charades in which their own daughters are not acting with eligible men after a heavy dinner. They were forgiven their somnoric tendencies, therefore, and their criticisms were allowed to have some weight.

O’Brien had been indefatigable in getting things well organized after he had seen the invitation-list; he had shown himself an adept in the art of situation and stage-management generally. Audrey, too, had entered with great spirit into the thing—and she had always been reputed a good actress. But the honours of the evening were not with the versatile Irishman and the recognised “capital hand at charades,” but with Lady Lorme and the Earl of Evesham. They chose—or rather she did, and he was prompt to follow suit—to alter the authorized conception of their respective characters in the word “forgotten.” They turned wit into pathos, and puerilities into passion, and the charade did, as the audience declared, go off “brilliantly.”

“My own Leonie! you are exerting yourself too much,” Sir Robert said, when his wife—the charades over—came and sat down by his side; “you look pale and tired.”

But no one could say that of my lady ten minutes after, when the conversation turned upon the great

topic of the day, the scandalous desertion of a husband by his wife for a man of higher rank.

All the women were particularly hard upon the divorced wife, whom her seducer had just married—that was one of those matter-of-course things to which my lady paid no attention. Some one mentioned that “the Queen would not receive her.” And then Lady Lorme pricked her ears up more keenly, and asked of a handsome well-born Guardsman “what sort of place she would take in society—*fashionable* society, you know?”

“None at all,” the Guardsman told her, with a stare at the simplicity of the question; “that is to say,” he continued, “she’ll have the best house in town, as far as amusement goes, for she’s a clever woman and a beauty; men will go there—the best men will go there!”

“But she has been quite a queen in society,” Lady Lorme said, flushing vividly, “and now with higher rank than she had before—”

“Oh, she wont be *in* society, you see,” the Guardsman interrupted; “women wont clash with her at all, because they wont have her.”

“Then,” thought Lady Lorme, “there is no help for me; I can’t forfeit my place—and I can’t give up Evesham.”

CHAPTER X.

IN WHICH SIR ROBERT GETS INTO COLD WATER, AND
MY LADY INTO HOT.

THAT dinner-party and charade-acting evening at Castle Corbyn was not a thing to conduce greatly to Miss Lorme's peace of mind, or to in any way restore Miss Lorme's lightheartedness. People—observant people with grown-up daughters—wagged their heads and remarked that Lord Evesham was clearly tired of the engagement, and ready enough to "break" if only the one to whom he was engaged would give him the opportunity. It was always so! just when a girl's heart is sorest, her friends and acquaintance show themselves ready, ay! ready, to kick the beam in her disfavour, and to send her down—down to any depths, of unsympathized despair.

But it was not only people whom she did not care for seeing things that caused disquietude to Audrey; she read—was it not written in legible characters enough for any one to read during the last scene in the last charade, when the word "forgotten" was fully portrayed?—she read then, I say, that a passion, and that no light one, lived in the hearts of Lady Lorme and Lord Evesham for one another.

Strong-minded women can take refuge in scorn when their lovers desert them or show themselves false and foully fickle; but the woman whose love has been

worth anything cannot do this so readily; she will continue to fondly love—long, long after she doubts.

For several months all Audrey's thoughts, plans, and feelings had been interwoven with this man; he was her present, her future, her all, her everything. It was very hard to awake suddenly to the knowledge that he could be this no longer; very hard indeed, and the certainty that it was inevitable did not make it at all the easier.

Long after the pangs of the affair were past and over, when peace was restored to her mind, and health to her cheek, and happiness to her heart, she could still, with the very slightest mental effort, recal every incident connected with that evening's agony. She could remember how the lights had danced, and the faces of the guests had swam before her when she first caught the glance that went like lightning from the lovely grey velvet eyes of Lady Lorme—the glance that was reciprocated immediately from the eyes of Lord Evesham. She could remember how languidly she had fulfilled her own part after seeing it, and how grateful she had felt—grateful though annoyed—to Dillon O'Brien for exerting himself immediately, and diverting the attention of others from her shortcomings. She could remember the sort of nervous thrill that ran through her being when this same Dillon O'Brien performed the cloaking operation for her on their departure; she could remember how gratitude and annoyance again struggled in her mind for precedence as he palpably showed her, by his earnest and successful endeavours to prevent other people from witnessing Lord Evesham's neglect, that he saw it himself. Everything, in fact, she could remember—the very flavour of the meagrely-flavoured jelly she ate, and

the sort of defiant warmth and glow the wine which Dillon handed to her infused into her heart—the idle words of conventional parting friendship, the light laugh some light joke called forth, the position of every one in the room as she looked round on leaving it and saw them all—and the last of Lord Evesham.

There was, there could be no friendship between these sisters-in-law now ; a hollow truce reigned, and that was all ; for it had come to this, that Audrey allowed my lady to perceive how heartily she despised her ; and my lady was not at all backward in allowing Audrey to perceive that she cordially hated Miss Lorme.

Lady Lorme could find no rest on her downy couch that night, she was suffering from a nervous headache, she said, and nothing but her dressing-room to herself and a book could assuage her agony. Sir Robert betrayed much fussy anxiety ; but he was, to his surprise, snubbed and sent off to such slumbers as he might be blessed with, in a most extraordinary, vehement, and peremptory manner.

And then Lady Lorme despatched her maid, and had, what she desired, the room to herself.

A passionate, ambitious woman, baffled at the outset in a plan on which she has set her heart and soul—or rather, her mind and hopes—is not a pleasant spectacle. At any rate, Lady Lorme would not have been such, even to the proverbial and oft-alluded-to mouse in the wall. The way she took to improve her nervous headache when she was “alone, quite alone,” was, to say the least of it, extraordinary. She rained down torrents of tears in a cataract, until her beautiful face was all swollen and distorted, blistered, and crimson ; she gnashed her little white teeth in a way that

strongly tested and effectually proved their reality; she gave vent to expletives that her husband could have sworn her lovely ears had never heard, or her lovely lips brought themselves to utter,—to expressions of vile hatred and disappointment, and passionate loathing and fierce resolve. And then she left off and calmed down with deceitful rapidity; and presently rose, and first bathed her head with eau-de-cologne, and then drank a quantity of it. And when she had had her rage and taken her recipe, she sat down on the crimson couch by the brightly leaping fire, and began to think and plan afresh.

Baffled!—baffled in the only path that could lead her to her guilty end without involving the commission of a double crime!

“The world urges me to it,” she said, the unscrupulous traitress; “the world, which makes a woman lose caste if she leaves one legal lord to gain even another legally and of higher rank. I can’t be a nothing, even for Evesham.”

She rose up and looked at herself steadily in the glass.

“Suppose he should die,” she said to herself—“die of a fall from his horse say, and they brought me the news, and told me while they could see my face? I wonder if my face would be a coward and betray me? I’ll try it. ‘Lady Lorme, your husband is dead.’ Bah! they wouldn’t tell me in that way, and even if they did, I could *look* through everything, I am sure—look my way to respectability and freedom, a new life and love.”

She huddled the folds of her dressing-gown closer round her now, and took a shawl and laid down on the couch, and covered herself with it. And soon,

strange as it may appear to those who deem that the wicked can know no rest, she was buried in the sleep that comes blessedly to all—the happy and unhappy, the sinful and the sinless alike. And in that deep and apparently guileless sleep she was found in the morning by her husband, whose rest, poor fellow, had been sadly disturbed by that aforesaid rebuff.

Perhaps Lady Lorme would have paused in her path and “held her daggers,” if she could only have seen the few lines Miss Lorme indited and despatched to Lord Evesham on the morning of the 21st. Audrey had also passed a feverish and unhappy night; she had plenty of pride, and plenty of the courage that comes from noble birth, high breeding, and high-heartedness; and these qualities would not suffer her longer to allow the least link to remain between the man who was evidently ceasing to love her and herself. She released him, not coldly, not callously, but with a proud, mournful firmness, against which, even had he been so inclined, there could be no appeal. But neither her pride, her courage, nor her high-heartedness made the pangs of that parting easier, the past pleasanter to look back upon, or the future a more endurable prospect. She sent off the little slender missive to Evesham by her own groom; it was delivered soon and safely, and Lord Evesham, after reading it, ordered his portmanteau and valet to follow him, and at once himself started off for London.

But Lady Lorme did not know any of these things, therefore she did not pause in her path.

Her appetite was more daintily capricious at luncheon this day than had ever been observable of that daintily-capricious appetite before. In vain did sedulous love offer her succulent morsels; she could

not touch them, but she drank wine—not “more than a lady ought to drink”—*vide* Thomas Ingoldsby—but enough to restring her nerves a little, and get some of her quailing determination back again.

“This wretched murky December weather tells upon me strangely,” at last she exclaimed, languidly, rising up as she spoke, and going to the window; “and being shut up in a close carriage has made me nervous from my infancy.”

“You are welcome to my pony-carriage, Lady Lorme,” said Audrey, who looked upon the speech as a broad hint for the offer to be made.

“Thank you; you are very kind,” said Lady Lorme, with dulcet peevishness; “but your pony-carriage always appears to me to be discomfort embodied: if you sit upright in it, you tumble against the dashboard; and if you lean back properly, you appear to be dropping out behind.”

“As you please,” said Audrey, haughtily. “I thought you wanted it, or I should not have offered it to you.”

“Will you go for a ride, Leonie dear?” asked Sir Robert, eagerly; “the Leprechaun will be rather fresh, I fear, but I’ll have him exercised for half an hour while you are getting ready; and you have such a splendid hand that he’ll carry you magnificently, I don’t doubt.”

“Yes, if you wish me to do so, Robert; certainly, as I don’t feel well, staying in the whole of this long, dreary afternoon would be bad for me; so, though I hardly feel up to the Leprechaun, I will go and put on my habit. Please don’t have the horse harassed into dejection before we start, though; I would rather have him ‘fresh,’ as you call it.”

And then she left the room, flashing them a brilliant parting smile, and saying, "*Au revoir*" in her sweetest accents.

The Leprechaun was full of corn and spirits and devilry, evidently, when his mistress came out and stood on the top of the steps, waiting for her husband's inspection of saddle and bridle arrangements to be completed before he allowed her to mount. How careful he was ! how he tightened the curb, and regulated the stirrups, and looked to the girths ! and how tenderly and well he finally gave her a hand-up and adjusted her flowing habit ! It was a pretty picture, even heartsore Audrey thought, as she stood at the window and watched that devoted husband and brilliantly-beautiful and accomplished Amazon.

My lady had always deprecated unnecessary leather about a horse's equipments ; so to-day, when she prettily insisted upon the Leprechaun's martingale being taken off, no one but the groom wondered at it. Sir Robert mildly protested that as they were simply going along the high road, and as the Leprechaun's trick of throwing his head back violently was rather increased than diminished, it would be just as well to retain the slight check ; but Lady Lorme hated a martingale, she said, and would have it off, and accordingly off it came.

Lady Lorme's spirits had risen to an exuberant pitch before they had passed out of the avenue ; they matched the Leprechaun's, in fact, and were bounding, unchecked, startling. The strong, well-built, powerful hunter Sir Robert rode caught the infection, and curvetted and pranced too, and was only with difficulty reduced to a proper roadster's order again by the sharp application of a spur, and the firm, heavy, inflexible grasp of the curb.

"Why, how light-hearted Pantaloon is!" said my lady; "isn't he a favourite, Robert, that you so seldom ride him?"

Sir Robert explained that Pantaloon was a famously good horse for straightforward heavy work; that though bought for a hunter, he was better on the roads than 'cross country, as he had a habit of blundering at his hedges, and bearing awkwardly on his bit, but that altogether he was a nice horse.

"A very nice horse," said my lady; "then he doesn't leap at all?"

"Oh, yes! Moderate places could be well managed by Pantaloon," Sir Robert said.

Providence, fate, chance—different people call the same things different names, and fight with each other as to the correctness of the respective nomenclatures—led them along the road to Evesham. They could see its grand old woods and lofty towers; its lands lay around them on all sides; its park wall bounded their path, and, looking over it, they could see troops of deer rushing madly about or browsing quietly.

"A fine place," said Sir Robert, thoughtfully. "I wish with all my heart Audrey was married and settled here."

"A very fine place," said my lady; and if Sir Robert had not given the rein to his thoughts and allowed them to wander off to his sister's prospects, he would have been startled by the strained, hoarse tones that issued from the lovely acquiescent lips of his wife.

"Let us ride back another way, Robert," she exclaimed, aloud; "I hate the straight monotonous road; let us go home round by the pine-tree wood; it will lengthen the ride a little and make it pleasanter."

As she spoke the Leprechaun bounded, and tried to

shake her in her saddle by a series of spasmodic leaps ; but my lady brought him under again presently with her steady hand and gentling voice.

"What made him do that, I wonder?" said Sir Robert ; "you didn't touch him with the spur, did you, Leonie ? I saw you had one on to-day : he wont stand the spur."

No ; Lady Lorme declared she had not given him a taste of her armed heel ; but she had, and the spirited Irish colt was ready now to jump out of his skin, his mettle was so magnificently up.

In the middle of the rough, dark pine-tree wood, through which my readers passed in the first page of this story, a break occurred in the regular growth of the trees. There was to the right of the road leading to Combhurst a long alley ; a dark, uneven, cheerless grove it looked, and down this alley, when they came to it, my lady suddenly turned her horse.

"Don't go that way, Leonie," said Sir Robert, hurriedly ; "it is a horrid road as far as it goes, and there's no outlet at the bottom of it ; it leads down to the Devil's Dyke."

"I wish to go, dear," said Lady Lorme, fawningly, and as she spoke she leaned down and patted her husband's horse on the shoulder. "I have a great desire to go down and see this famous leap that, I hear, baffled a whole field last year when a stag chose to take it : *what* gallant riders Warwickshire turned out that day, to be sure !"

"There were plenty of good riders out," said Sir Robert, "and the whole field wasn't baffled ; some men cleared it, but of course those whose horses must have infallibly jumped short would have been fools to try it."

"Ah! indeed; but it *sounds* as if they were very cowardly, doesn't it?" said my lady. And then they drew near to the bottom of the alley, and looked at the famed Devil's Dyke.

It was an ugly leap, and no mistake, especially when viewed from the side on which they were. A dark, wide, deep chasm, with a low rolling roar sounding up from the waters which rushed along at the bottom of it, welling up to add to its horrors. Immediately below where they stood, chasm and waters alike buried themselves under a hill, and the course the water took was down—down to that dark grave in the earth where its secrets would be safely buried for ever.

Suddenly Lady Lorme slackened her curb, and settled herself still more firmly to the saddle.

"We can take that leap easily, Robert," she said, "and shame all Warwickshire for ever. Come on."

She saw, in the one moment she had to see anything, doubt and distrust, and agony at feeling it, flash from her husband's eyes, and flush her husband's face. And then the remorseless, beautiful woman, who looked like an angel and was cruel as a fiend, dug the spur into her own horse's side, lifted him to the leap, and at the same moment struck Pantaloon on his shoulder. She was whirled through the air—for the Leprechaun came of a gallant stock that never refused anything, and when he lighted with a scramble on the opposite side, she looked round and saw Pantaloon leaping short and *falling!*

A fierce, indomitable courage rose in her heart and prevented its quailing or sinking, even when the dull heavy fall into the dark waters smote her ear. She lifted her hat off her hot head, and wiped the clammy sweat of intense excitement off her brow, and then shook the

reins and laid the whip furiously across the shoulder of the horse who had served her ends so well. In a moment she was flying off home like the wind, but fast as she rode, her mind travelled faster, and she saw herself—a few months of hideously tiresome seclusion past—queening it in society, an unsuspected woman, as Countess of Evesham.

“Home!” she exclaimed, with frightful exultation: “home! to play the disconsolate widow, and to send for Evesham at once as the sympathising friend.”

The mastiffs’ heads on the massive iron gates seemed to grin and gnash their teeth at her ominously as she drew up her panting steed and cried out for admission.

“Lord love us! there’s something wrong,” the old woman who kept the gate said to her cat and tea-kettle, when she went back into her cottage after admitting her mistress. And well she might say so, for my lady’s face had gleamed like a star through the coming darkness, by reason of its death-like pallor and the brilliancy of her eyes.

Miss Lorme was in the hall when the sound of horses’ hoofs coming up the avenue at a reckless pace alarmed her.

“Something has run away with somebody,” she said, and she called the porter to open the door quickly, and herself followed out on to the step. The sight that met her was her sister-in-law alone, and overwhelmed with grief and horror.

“Why, Leonie,” she cried, in her anxiety quite forgetting that she had grown in these latter days to call her Lady Lorme, “what have you done?—where is Robert?”

“Dead! dead! in the Devil’s Dyke!” said my

lady, with wild energy, and then she was saved from further questioning, for Audrey Lorme fainted.

"Send for Lord Evesham instantly—*instantly*," said my lady; and then she rushed to her own room to nurse her own woe in solitude. She remained there till late in the evening, when she rose up and unbolted her door, and called to one of the wondering domestics.

"What message from Evesham?"

"The earl is gone to town, my lady, and they don't know his address."

"She's right worried out of her life, poor lamb!" the aforesaid domestic observed, afterwards. "When I was speaking to her she cried out, 'Oh, my God!' and fell down like a stone."

All the neighbourhood joined in the search for the body of the kind landlord, the generous gentleman, the esteemed friend and good master, before nightfall. But the result was even more miserable than had been anticipated. The body of poor Pantaloon was found bruised and water-inflated, but not a trace of his master could be seen anywhere. Clearly he had been detached from his horse by the force of the current, and washed under the hill-side.

So the last of the Lormes died, and had not even a Christian burial.

CHAPTER XI.

“SINFUL SISTER, PART IN PEACE.”

WHEN such a tragedy as that recorded in the last chapter is enacted in a country neighbourhood, especially when it concerns the magnates of it, it takes that neighbourhood some considerable time to recover the shock. Every one was intensely sympathetic, and they brought the intensity of their sympathy to Combhurst, and offered it to the bereaved wife and sister.

For a short time the widow had “borne up,” as people called it, wonderfully; and poor Audrey had given way to the wildest and most passionately uttered reproachful bursts of grief. But after a period their respective states were changed, and *why* they were, became a problem that their friends and acquaintances would have forfeited a good deal to solve.

The Combhurst estates were entailed on a female, in default of a male heir; so after the reading of the will Lady Lorme was legally a cipher at Combhurst, and Audrey was lady of the soil and mansion. But these were not the circumstances, even their greatest detractors admitted, which elevated the spirits of the sister and depressed those of the wife.

When “poor Lorme’s sad fate” ceased to be so all-absorbing a topic, men began to talk about a mysterious rumour that had arisen with regard to the Earl of Evesham. He was spoken of as having turned Ca-

tholic, and renounced the world in some way or other; and many-tongued rumour multiplied herself, and assigned all sorts of causes for such a proceeding, amongst which madness and murder found a place.

Lady Lorme began to droop just after this rumour arose; not that she believed it, but she was frantic with impatience to hear from or see him; and he neither wrote nor came.

Corbyn Castle was just about the same time the scene of much domestic discord, for Lady Grace's temper became soured by Mr. O'Brien's repeated absences, frequent visits to Combhurst, and other signs of profound indifference to her own right honourable charms. Her sisters, with the proverbial amiability of that particular class of kith and kin, lost no opportunity of probing her woes in this respect, "wounding to heal," in fact, as only jealous, spiteful women can.

Lady Grace's must be acknowledged to be a hard fate. She had shown herself, not alone to *him* (that would not have mattered, for Dillon O'Brien was a gentleman every inch of him), but to her family, as ready and willing to forget her claims to honour and glory—to come down from her high estate and marry the poor, landless, moneyless secretary. And now here her heroic willingness and readiness was thrown back upon herself, for Dillon O'Brien clearly did not want to marry her.

It was sufficiently mortifying, without her mother and sisters persisting in moralizing over it perpetually; but as Lord Corbyn forswore handsome secretaries for the future, his daughters knew that an opportunity was not likely to arise for *their* weaknesses to be tried, so they lashed their youngest sister's unmercifully

during the period that elapsed between Dillon O'Brien giving the agreed-upon notice to quit and quitting.

It was hard and mortifying when so many people were awaiting the opportunity of bearing down upon her remorselessly with censure severe and cutting, that Miss Lorme should have left her home about this time to go and travel on the Continent with the family of an uncle, thus depriving friends and foes alike of subject-matter for conversation as far as regarded "Audrey Lorme's extraordinary proceedings." Some had hoped she would have married the young Irish secretary with whom she appeared so strangely and unaccountably friendly, and thus give room for, and rise to, scandal for so soon forgetting her old love and her brother's horrible fate. But Audrey did not do this—and to the few who saw her before she left Combhurst she gave no hint of its being her intention to do it. Neither did she rail against or avoid all mention of Lord Evesham's name. On the contrary, when one kind and clever tactician, in the person of Lady Julia Corbyn, pressed her on the point with pungent indelicacy, she said that his conduct seemed strange and dishonourable even, but might *not* be so for all that. She could not even be induced to be severe in her judgment on Lady Lorme, or utter suppositions as to her probable present and future destiny. For Lady Lorme had elected, immediately on her jointure being secured to her, to go off on a pilgrimage alone.

So Audrey Lorme went away to join her uncle—her mother's brother, Mr. Audrey; and the grand *suite* of rooms on the ground-floor were clothed in brown holland, and my lady's crimson-lined boudoir was darkened and shut up, and Combhurst was left to

the care of servants, and to its memories and the rats. And so months passed away, and the horror of these things passed away too.

"Poor fellow! his whole life sacrificed to an idea!"

The speaker was Dillon O'Brien; the time was the July following the sad December when the last of the Lormes had gone to his long home and found his death in the Devil's Dyke. The place was the drawing-room of Mr. Audrey's house in Park Lane, and the one addressed by the whilom secretary was Miss Lorme.

"Poor fellow! poor fellow, indeed!" said Audrey, bitterly. "But everything has been tried, Dillon; I have wept, and prayed, and implored; my uncle has commanded and entreated him to come out of his seclusion; but it's all of no avail, we only pain him by asking, he says, and the sooner I am married the happier he will be."

"Then all my scruples ought to vanish," replied Dillon; "but it seems rather a queer thing for one fellow to step into such happiness as mine will be through the circumstance of another man's utter defeat and downfall. What a devil that woman was to have bewitched him so!"

From which short and jagged bit of conversation it will be perceived by the intelligent reader that Audrey Lorme and Dillon O'Brien had arranged matters so satisfactorily that they had no longer any occasion to give a sigh when they looked back or wandered in memory through the alley of limes.

The marriage ceremony was solemnized at that edifice where every marriage is, or ought to be, in novels—viz., St. George's, Hanover Square. The bride

looked lovely, as a matter of course, in white moire antique, and the eight bridesmaids wore a judicious combination of pink and blue, with May blossom wreaths, typical these last of their extreme juvenility and surprising innocence.

In addition to the inevitable invited guests, a large concourse of people assembled to see the wedding of the lady who was such a great heiress through her brother's untimely death. An item—a mere item, she was so fragile and slender—in the crowd seemed to think it the reverse of a sad sight to see a "gay and girlish thing give up her maiden gladness for a name and for a ring;" for when the last words were spoken, and the knot that only Sir Cresswell Cresswell could loosen was tied, this lady gave vent to an exclamation of passionate pleasure, and clapped her hands till they sounded, and made people look at her; seeing which, she went out rapidly and entered a neatly appointed little brougham, drawn by a horse whose paces fully entitled him to have been paired for a mail-phaeton, or promoted at once to a private cab. "Home," she said, "home quickly;" and home she was driven to a bijou house in Old Brompton Lane, which looked a mere cottage of content, and was a miniature palace of luxury.

She was a pretty woman, this owner of the brougham and mistress of the house—a pretty woman, but a pale, haggard, careworn one. Her face was lovely as to form and feature, but terrible in its cold wan pallor, in its ashy deadness of hue. Her eyes were painfully large and glittering; painful in their look of long unrest, painful in their ceaseless expression of watchfulness, painful above all in the brilliancy of their anxiety. She had suffered evidently, the Venus of

this abode of bliss—suffered much and long, and “what about?” her servants wondered, she so young, and rich, and beautiful.

It was about one o’clock when she reached the bijou house in the Old Brompton Lane, and there were dainty little birds daintily roasted awaiting her on a hot-water dish on the luncheon-table. There was a tempting paté, too, and a marvellous pudding, for her cook was a German, and profound in rare confectionary. But she turned from all these succulent morsels with impatient loathing, and drank eagerly some sparkling wine that sent new light into her eyes, and new life into her veins, and courage to her heart. Woe for the woman if she had come to this.

She was dressed in black silk, this lady; in rich, lustrous, yet not shiny black silk; it was made long, full, sweeping like the garment of a queen, yet absolutely without trimming or adornment, like the garb of an anchorite. There was nothing to relieve its black surface, no plain white collar or coquettishly neat cuffs; nothing, absolutely nothing, save a dead gold cross suspended from a black velvet round her throat.

So, while the bridal pair were speeding away on that eternal tour which is being taken daily by deluded pairs, as a precursor to long years of calmer domestic felicity, the lady who had watched them from behind the pillar, sat and waited with impatient yearning for the shades—the tender, soft shades of summer evening—to come on.

“Unless his burial in the church has made him less of a man than he was in the world,” she said at last, when she had entered her brougham, and directed it to the chapel, “he will hear me now—hear my con-

fession, absolve, and be to me once more what he was when I risked my soul to gain him."

There was a beautiful, soul-subduing, gentling influence in the atmosphere of the chapel when she entered it. We Protestants do wrong, I think, in ceasing from all these things that soften the heart through touching the taste. Surely none are further from heaven through finding the odour of incense and roses sweet while here on earth. In another respect, too, we undoubtedly are wrong, and are wronged: why should we be condemned to sit through five-and-twenty or thirty minutes of boring platitudes droned out frequently in a bad voice, and with a bad style of pronunciation? It is an insult to well-educated people, and those who are refined as well as religious, to have to sit and listen to what *may* be pious and virtuous, but is unquestionably priggish and vulgar.

She had been agitated, excited, greatly wrought upon during her drive hither, but now when she entered the church where this old religion was celebrated, a strange calm, a holier influence fell upon her, and soothed her into unnatural quiescence.

Yet, all unnatural as it was, it rested and calmed her; ceased the throbbing heart and the beating brain, and the frightfully gnawing excitement, for a time, at least. And then, when the calm had reigned for a few minutes, this penitent went into the confessional; the moment was come when, strong in her recently gained knowledge of an important fact, she could face with fresh hopes and courage her priest, and former lover.

Could he who had fanned the flame of her love be false and cold to her now? Could the hot heart that had burned, and the hot words that had been uttered

in the dead buried "long ago" be as nothing to the man who felt it and uttered them? Perish the dread of such perfidy! perish since it could never be justified! Or had—oh, terrible fear!—asceticism and the holier influences of Mother Church been found sufficient to work the change that should cause him to think of his soul with more anxiety than of herself?

We know how women cling to the straw while a splinter of it remains where their hearts are engaged; we know how they hope against hope, and buoy themselves up against despair. We know how they will excuse to others and to themselves, with equal volubility, any shortcomings on the part of the one loved. But we also know how bitterly they will feel these shortcomings, and yearn for a kinder era to dawn for them and their suffering hearts.

Now there had been nothing ennobling about the mad, hot-headed, ambitious passion Lady Lorme had felt for Lord Evesham. But such as it was, it had been powerful and fierce enough to call forth an equally strong one from him in return. Honour, friendship, all, everything had bidden him depart from her too captivating presence, when he discovered to what audacious lengths she was prepared to carry her schemes for first protracting and then utterly frustrating his marriage engagement with Audrey Lorme. He had seen through and despised her for the transparent deception practised upon them all in that matter of the *trousseau*; but at the same time (the race of Evesham were, as he had said, almost invariably unhappy or wicked) he had been unable to resist her charms, and his increasing love for her. Then, like even bolder, better, braver men, he had taken the one course open for him to pursue when Audrey's dis-

missal reached him—he *had run away*. Away! from all these earthly trials and temptations which ever beset unwary, weak, sinful man, while he is in the world; away from his cares and responsibilities, his love and his bane, his shame and his sorrow; away, to bury them all in the bosom of the Church.

You may have passed through many a harsh and trying ordeal, reader; but have you ever passed through one after which there is, you find (oh! sorrowful that it should be so) no more pain and suffering for you; an ordeal, coming out of which you find that everything has decreased in value and importance; that poverty means only starvation, rags, dirt, and wretchedness, and is, therefore, nothing; that health means only a fuller and stronger power of *feeling*, and is, therefore, little worth; that sickness means only a shortening of the time you may be compelled to live in the world that has used you so hardly; that riches will buy you anything save the one thing you needed; and that grief and anguish attained their full and lasting sway on that day when you passed through your ordeal, and can never be assuaged or added to, let what will come? If you have, you will understand and sympathize with the feelings of the penitent who quitted the priest on that fair July evening.

The brougham had come for her again at the time appointed by her when she went in to perform her orisons, and make her plea. The handsomely appointed brougham, lined with fawn-coloured and blue silk, with its pockets for scent-bottles, and shelving rests for books, with its soft, luxurious cushions and splendidly working springs. Never a jolt nor a jar could be felt by its occupant, no matter what the road over which it rumbled. Many eyes followed the little brougham

in which reclined gracefully so passing fair a woman, and between the shafts of which was placed so magnificently actioned a horse. The coachman, without thinking that aught could exist to render a contrary course desirable, did as was usual, and turned into the Park till seven. No curly, white-haired dog looked from the window, nor were the silken blinds lowered to attract attention ; yet many a glance was levelled with inquiring admiration at that “ neat turn out ” and its occupant. But she sat there still in the prime of her youth, dead, lost, stonily indifferent to everything. On the clear evening air were borne to her murmurs from the gay, well-modulated voiced crowd around—borne to her, but not to her ears or senses. Blind to the sight, dead to the sense, deaf to the sounds of the Park, and ring, and promenade, she saw but one thing—a tonsured head bowing low, in a crueller agony than even *she* would have inflicted ; heard but one sound, the voice of a man signing the death-warrant of her heart and life in the words, “ Sinful sister, part in peace.”

CHAPTER XII.

SUNSHINE AT COMBHURST AGAIN.

I DOUBT the fact of there ever having lived a man so accursed by fate, whose life has been so utterly desolate, but what he has found one woman in the world to love him—not for what he has, but for what he individually is. No matter what his personal appearance, some woman will be found to adore a baboon with a soul in it.

But when a man's fortune and station in youth has been the mark at which many crafty and designing women have aimed, betraying the while they did it, most tactlessly, that they were indifferent to himself; and when, added to this, a woman, fair without and foul within, has been adored by him in his maturity, and has used that adoration for her own fell purposes,—a man, when he arrives at the age of forty, may be excused for deeming himself that one singular accursed one on whom the heart of woman has never been set.

In a house about eight miles from London, on the old Dover road, about six months after the sentence recorded in my last had been passed by the priest on his penitent, a family party, two or three members of which we have met before, were assembled in earnest conclave. The master of the house, a tall, care-worn man, robed, though it was evening, in the dressing-gown of habitual and sluggish seclusion, occupied a seat on the left side of the fire; close to his

elbow a lady was seated, pleading in cordial, heart-fraught accents for a boon to be granted her ; and while she sits and pleads thus fervently, we will look leisurely at the aforesaid master of the house, and cursorily at his guests.

I have said that he was a tall, care-worn man ; this expresses little, for every other man one meets in the world is tall and care-worn—or short and the same. This was a sorrow-worn man, a disappointed, a shocked man ; a man who had evidently not attained that fine height and broad, powerful, massive form under the influence of the “something” that now bent his head low with such broken-hearted meekness. Forty is not wont to have such deep, pallid wrinkles round its lips and under its eyes ; and forty has no right whatever with such straggling, thin, white hair.

A man “broken” early in life is always a sad, miserable spectacle—so is a woman, for that matter ; but through the man having been originally stronger, you feel that the breakage must have been caused by a worse fall than would have sufficed to mar the delicate surface of a woman. And this man was so thoroughly “broken,” you read that he was so in the drooping, almost crouching attitude he took, in his inert ways and disconsolate tone. You read it in the restless nerveless habit he had of twisting and twirling his fingers about, as if they were too many for him, and he wished they would lie down. You read it in the very feebleness of the half-slippered feet, in the uninterested eye, and in the giving up of all things which characterised his untidy costume.

In addition to the mental languor which was preying upon and threatening to devour him, you could see at a glance that physical suffering must have been

raging frightfully in that not long ago stalwart form. He was thin and attenuated, besides which his left brow was scarred, and the whole of the left side of his face seamed as with fire or a fall.

Will one of my readers be prepared from this account of him to hear that the man who sat by the fire in the room of the house on the Dover road was the one whom all alike down in Warwickshire had mourned as lying drowned, dead, buried for ever in the bottom of the Devil's Dyke?

Yes, it was Sir Robert Lorne himself! and how he came to be there in the flesh shall now be told—sketchily perforce, but truly nevertheless.

Dillon O'Brien, wandering about that December afternoon in the purposeless pedestrian manner to which unhappy people ill of a heart-wound are prone, found himself strangely attracted to the vicinity of Combhurst. Now, when it is borne in mind what Combhurst contained for him, nothing wonderful will be discovered in this by sensible people; but still, taking all things into consideration, it was marvellously lucky that he should have gone where he did.

Walking in a desultory way through an alley in the pine-tree wood, his ear and attention had been caught by the sound of horses' hoofs and human voices. Pursuing his investigations further, he discovered that the horses were bearing the forms of Sir Robert and Lady Lorne, and that the voices proceeded from them (from the baronet and his wife, that is to say, not from the horses).

They were riding down the gulley to the fatal leap when he saw and heard them first; something flashed upon him that caused him to dread mischief, so he

followed them close up—close enough to hear the words she said, to divine her fatal intention, and to see her give the cut which caused poor Pantaloon to leap for his life and lose it, but *not* near enough for the exclamation of horror he gave to reach the ear of the excited woman who leapt the chasm, and then looked back, seeing nothing but escape from the fate she had grown to loathe.

He had faced many dangers and overcome many difficulties in his life; Irishmen are proverbially hot-headed in everything but danger; so now it was with an unflinching step and a cool, firm hand, that Dillon O'Brien let himself down, when my lady galloped off, the side of the dark chasm at the bottom of which he anticipated finding the mutilated body of the brother of the girl he loved.

Pantaloon was stone dead with his neck broken; the poor horse was nearly, but not quite, immersed in the water, a projecting piece of bank had caught his flank and propped it up, and along over the horse, bleeding and senseless, lay the master. To get him up by dint of earnestness and strength combined, such as a man but seldom brings to bear upon anything—to stay with him till speech and sense returned faintly and partially—to then procure assistance from a surgeon friend of his (Sir Robert's), on whose prudence the latter declared he could rely—these were a few of the things Dillon O'Brien did for Audrey's brother.

One thing at first, *only*, Sir Robert's terrible weakness and prostration induced him, in mercy to the poor, betrayed, half-murdered man, to consent to, and that one thing was the observance of profound secrecy. "You don't know how I loved, and trusted, and worshipped that woman," he said, while they sat by

his bed in his friend's house that night, expecting the lamp of life momentarily to go out. "You don't know how I loved, and trusted, and worshipped that woman. I can't expect you fellows to know it, for you're younger than I am, *but I never touched a woman's hand with warmth* before. After that, oh, my God! even *now*, even now, how the thought of her breaks me. I couldn't proclaim her what she has proved herself; I couldn't shame her by letting her read in my eyes that I know what was in her heart when, when——"

You see how it was? He could not go back to life, because he could not shame the woman he had loved—he *still* loved—by the sight of him alive and knowing her, after she had striven to compass his death. He could not go back and be as he had been before to her, for he was true, and could not have lived a lie. He could not go back to the world and proclaim her for what she was, and claim his release from one who had broken his heart, but who had been *so* dear to him.

So for an "idea"—but the idea was honour, the honour of his name and of her who had been his wife—he desired that no one but Audrey should know he still lived. And that was the reason Audrey had brightened and recovered after her first interview with Dillon O'Brien; for in that interview Dillon O'Brien told her all about her brother and a good deal—the circumstances must be his excuse—about himself.

Now I must go back to the special pleading alluded to by me in the opening of this chapter, and see how it has progressed during this retrospective and resuscitating flight.

The lady who leant on the arm of the broken, prematurely old man was his sister Audrey, Mrs. O'Brien.

With all the force of her old love for him, the sister pleaded that he should come out of his retirement and resume his proper place in the world. She used every argument seemingly that affection could devise, and she failed ; he only shook his head and said he could not, he could not. What agonies *she* would suffer, poor lost thing, if she knew that her guilt was patent to him.

Then Mrs. O'Brien rose and signalled to her husband to leave them, which he did, taking with him a guest they had brought up from Combhurst, Blanche O'Brien, Dillon's sister, a golden-haired beauty, with laughing, surprised blue eyes.

When they were alone Audrey's purpose, whatever it had been, seemed to fail her. At last, with a great effort she gasped out—

“Robert, she knew it—she knew that you lived.”

“Knew?”

“Yes ; after my marriage—long, long after, a Roman Catholic priest came to see me ; can you not guess who he was?”

“Evesham?”

“Yes ! Evesham ; Father Gabriel now ; Lord Evesham no longer. On the evening of my wedding-day he learnt enough under the seal of confessional from your erring wife to justify his seeking me, vilely, vilely as he had formerly insulted us. He told me nothing—no priest would peril his soul by betraying his penitent—but he came to give me the assurance for the sake of the honour of his family, he said, that never again, even in the church, would he see or hold converse with her. I guessed from that *what* she had told him ; so then—forgive me, Robert—I told him that you lived.”

So far Sir Robert had listened patiently ; now he raised his head, and asked quickly — “ You said ‘knew.’ What do you mean?—does she not know now? Don’t try to puzzle me, Audrey—don’t; I can’t bear it.”

“ She knows all things now, God have mercy on her soul ! ” said his sister ; and then she flung her arms round her brother’s neck and sobbed, and Sir Robert Lorme knew that his wife was dead.

He acknowledged with contrition how faulty his idea had been when he emerged at last many weeks after this scene from his retirement, and heard the popular roar of indignation against the course he had pursued, and the popular rumours as to the reason why he had pursued it .The soft, genial, invigorating air of Italy was requisite to restore his mind to its healthy tone ; it did this partially, but the cure was completed after all at Combhurst, where his sister, her husband, Blanche O’Brien continued to reside for some time after his tour in pursuit of health had ended.

When Sir Robert Lorme came back to dwell in his old family mansion, a free man, a widower, “ without incumbrances,” and in all respects, it was hoped, improved and chastened by the great sufferings he had undergone, many a fair bosom heaved high with hope. He would surely act on the lesson given him, and not a second time marry a “ nobody,” said the ladies. Men even went so far as to say that the lesson would be thrown away if a second time he married at all ! However, that remained to be proved ; so, on the chance of proving it, the Countess of Corbyn stopped another subscription (commenced in a weak hour, when the star of an archdeacon was in the ascendant with Lady Margaret) and gave a ball.

As it turned out, this ball was the worst thing the unfortunate lady and devoted mother could have given, for at it appeared Blanche O'Brien in a blaze of youthful charms that put out everybody else as effectually as moonbeams do a tallow candle. Sir Robert Lorme had got used to seeing her at home at Comb-hurst ; she excited no surprise in his mind then, for he had grown accustomed to seeing her ; but at the ball the case was different.

He marked with astonishment how lovely she was, and he marked with displeasure how lovely all the men seemed to think her. He tried to remember the blackest portions of the horrible ordeal he had passed, through pleasing his taste and his heart in his choice of a wife even when he was younger and keener than he was now. And he could not remember anything clearly, for Blanche was constantly whirling past and dazzling him.

He called himself an old, blighted man, and scoffed at himself for looking at her, and carried himself by a gigantic exercise of will out of the ball-room and into the midst of a body of politicians, who directly made a set at him, and bored him, and drove him back incontinently into the ball-room, where he fell to staring at Blanche harder than ever, so hard indeed that she caught the glance and blushed. Altogether he was fain to confess to himself that night in the solitude of his own room, that he had had many tussles with the spirit that was urging him on to defy fate a second time, and that in every tussle he got a fall that rendered him weaker and more open to the attacks of the sweet enemy who had been hitherto so disregarded.

Blanche O'Brien was one of those fair, delicately

handsome women with *retroussé* noses and graceful ways, who carry their point by dint of their sheer fascination. With a tender frankness that belonged entirely to her character, she had allowed Audrey to see that Audrey's brother was dear to her in the very early days of their intercourse. "It would be good for him to marry me, because I love him so," she said, with true womanly logic. And in time Sir Robert came to think that it would be good, too, and to struggle against his golden-haired fate no longer.

They were married at Combhurst church, as was right and proper for a Lorme to be. There was no mistake about Blanche's *trousseau*, though her *sister-in-law* had the entire management of it. The bride went from her brother's house, for the O'Briens had hired "a place" close to Combhurst, and gone into it a short time previous to the wedding, in order that the Lady of Combhurst might not go to her husband from her husband's roof.

Lady Lorme wanted to raise a little monument of thanksgiving and commemoration close to the spot where her husband's life had been so providentially saved by her brother. But loving lord as he was, in this one thing he was stern, that never by look, word, or gesture, should the "present" refer to the crime of the "late" Lady Lorme.

So the little monument was never raised down by the Devil's Dyke. However, in spite of this solitary prohibition, there was sunshine again of a rarely golden order down at Combhurst. The young, beautiful wife, whose only subtilty was her love, renewed the life which the former one had so nearly blasted. He was grey-haired, 'tis true; nothing but dye, not even hap-

pineness, restores the colour of the locks when once it has fled; but his face soon ceased to be pallid, and grief-seamed, and despair-furrowed. He had another vast comfort too, putting all others out of the question: his wife was less clever than he himself! When the reverse is the case, when the early love glamour is over, the man, even if his wife be devoted to him, will rue the day he took steps towards perpetually supping sorrow by the spoonful.

Here we will take leave of them, and of each other, reader. "My dream is passed, my hour of pride is over." I have told my story poorly enough, I know. Its object has been to amuse, and if in that object it has succeeded, it has fulfilled its mission.

But before the book is closed, bear with me and bear me company a moment longer. The scene shall close in a far-west London cemetery. A grave, grass-covered, but void of flowers, is visible under the silvery moonbeams through which I stand and look at it. A small head-stone, with just the letters "L. L." on it, stands out clearly and distinctly. And a form is kneeling by that grave—the form of a man robed in the straight, long garment which covers and closes in so many proud, loving, aching hearts. And as he lifts his clasped hands aloft in passionate prayerful appeal to the "Lady of Heaven," his tones ring out in genuine agonized entreaty the words that all who live, and may sin, will join in, "God assoil her."

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